"Uncivilizing" the Social Justice Classroom: Civility and Emotion in Critical Thinking

Sally J. Sayles-Hannon
Syracuse University

> We are raced, gendered, sexed, classed and this has important implications for the way we think and act, for how others interact with us.
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> —Wendy Kohli, "Education for Emancipatory Rationality"

Recently, I took a social justice course that revolved around the politics of race in education. As with many courses I have taken that are geared toward social justice, a prime course goal was to engage in a critical thought process about issues of racial oppression. All of the students in the course were in MA or PhD programs that emphasize equality in education and, as such, the course was designed with the assumption that students had prior introductory knowledge about racial oppression. In fact, many of the students had previously taken classes together regarding issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality and education. Students, in general, arrived to class excited to share a course where we knew so many of our peers and hoped that this class would provide great discussion. The class, however, took a turn for the worse when Claire,[1] an older-white-female student, was unwilling to acknowledge how racism extended beyond individual, overtly racist acts.[2] Claire was reluctant, ultimately, to understand how her white skin, not only her actions, made her complicit in racism.

As the course progressed, many of the students stopped participating regularly. Generally speaking, many students became silent, preoccupied with Facebook or email, and often just nodded and smiled when Claire spoke. In class it would have not been obvious most of the time that students disagreed with her; however, outside conversations provided evidence of frustration, opposing views, and anger toward Claire. In various out-of-class discussions, the students would talk about each other's pent-up hostility. In my view, a lot of the anger arose from feelings that Claire did not make an effort to engage with other student's experiences and ideas and, more importantly, think outside her own racial background. We felt, though, that since the instructor, a woman of color, did not question the white student and express "uncivil" emotions or statements, that it was not our place to do so. In this sense, we felt that we needed to maintain civility, even though we had all withdrawn from engaging in class discussions in a productive, critically-reflective manner.

Why did the disagreeing students stay quiet and, in turn, build up immense hostility toward Claire? I believe the frustrated students remained silent partly because of the social convention of civility — that is, a notion that certain "uncivil" emotions like anger, annoyance, or contempt are not permissible in classroom environments and that even expressions of sharp, critical disagreement might be read as anger. When I use the term civility, I am specifically referencing normalized, social-communicative practices that involve, as Cheshire Calhoun claims, "displays

of respect, tolerance, or considerateness."[3] Adhering to customs of civility may imply disregarding one's own feelings and beliefs in order to avoid being construed as ill mannered or impolite by others. I am not, however, asserting that all manifestations of civility are harmful. Civility, according to Calhoun and Megan Laverty, is a communicative virtue that secures companionability between seemingly unfamiliar persons and, as such, assists in creating friendly environments for exploring issues of social difference.[4]

My concern with civility is directed, then, not at the concept itself, but rather at how the norm functions within certain contexts like the social justice classroom. As Elizabeth Higginbotham explains,

> Teaching to a diverse student population requires attention to classroom interactions. Our classrooms are part of the larger social world, thus structural inequalities in the larger society are reproduced in the classroom in terms of power and privilege.[5]

Arguably, while civility may help students of different social locations discuss topics of social hierarchy and oppression, it is important for the social justice classroom to also address how such a norm may conceal and, in turn, reproduce social injustices. In discussions with students of color in the classroom, they stated that their silence was often due to an understanding that their feelings were not appropriate in the classroom. That is, the students of color felt that their anger and sadness would be perceived as "uncivil" by white students like Claire. Sara Ahmed explains, "To speak out of anger as a Black woman is then to confirm your position as the cause of tension." Diversity, at least within the mainstream discourse, has become a "cuddly" word to describe "a politics of feeling good."[6] If a person of color spoke out in anger in the classroom, then, they would be charged with disrupting the happiness of the classroom. Ahmed further explains in her discussion of feminist subjects, that the very entrance of persons that discuss "unhappy" topics, such as racism, sexism, and so on, reveal how happiness is maintained and, in turn, erase "the signs of not getting along" and "disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain place."[7]

As I continue to reflect on my experience in this class, however, I realize that the norm of civility may not only have prevented the students of color from engaging fully, but might also be concealing Claire's unwillingness to interpret racism systematically. Discussions about racism in the class often provoked responses of initial agreement by Claire, but such statements always ended with "my best friend is black" or "I don't see color."[8] These replies were used as a way for Claire to disassociate herself from racism — to be recognized as a "good" white person. She did not want to experience social disapproval from her peers, especially her peers of color. The engrained sense of civility the students in this course maintained is a prime example of how civility has, potentially, diluted the learning and utilizing of critical thinking in social justice courses. As Cris Mayo notes, civility has likely become evermore prevalent "because schools are always concerned with how students get along with one another."[9] Students are socialized from a young age to get along, to not hurt each other's feelings. Thus, the absence of talk based on

"uncivil" emotions like anger, sadness, guilt, or frustration might be a roadblock that prevents students, especially dominant students, from critically thinking about the material.

In this essay, I examine how civility may deter critical thinking through the suppression of "uncivil" emotional responses. I will begin with Harvey Siegel's conception of critical thinking, which encompasses both skills and dispositions. Second, I explain how civility potentially impedes critical thinking in the social justice classroom. For the purpose of this essay, I specifically focus on how civility obstructs white students' ability to critically engage with issues of social oppression.[10] Third, I assert that critical thinking, at least within the social justice classroom, requires recognizing the cognitive role of "uncivil" emotions. In short, this essay hopes to not dismiss the importance of critical thinking in social justice education, but rather hopes to show how critical thinking can be an effective tool for social and educational transformation.

CRITICAL THINKING AND CIVILITY

In Siegel's account of critical thinking, he contends that critical thinkers are determined by an ability to reason well and a disposition to act in accordance with the reasons assessed. The first criterion entails not only the ability to assess reasons, but the employment of that skill for appropriate action. In other words, critical thinkers must have the capacity to "construct and evaluate" reasons presented in defense or rebuttal of a claim.[11] Secondly, critical thinkers have to possess a disposition for critical thinking or the "critical spirit."[12] Siegel's notion of the "critical" spirit refers to the habit of and character for critical thinking. In other words, critical thinkers are concerned with reasons and their beliefs, judgments, and actions are guided by reasons.[13]

How does civility impede critical thinking? Mayo contends that civility is a guise that maintains the oppressive status quo, especially in classes on diversity.[14] Building on Mayo's claim, I assert that civility deters critical thinking by obstructing the dominant group's ability to assess reasons and potentially diminishes such students' disposition toward critical thinking. In my opening example, Claire's unwillingness to acknowledge how her white skin made her complicit in systematic racism was largely because she did not want to be perceived negatively by her peers. She closed herself off from critiques about her reasons by employing statements like "race doesn't matter to me, I don't see color." Comments by Claire, which were not given angrily, prevented the entrance of reasons that would have questioned her status, privilege, and, ultimately, understanding of racism.[15] If a student of color criticized Claire's comments, the student of color may have been construed as being "uncivil." Ahmed makes a similar point when she explains that black women's "reasonable thoughtful arguments [about racism] are dismissed as anger."[16] The silencing of students of color that is provoked by norms of civility, then, potentially leaves the dominantly-located students' reasons unrefuted.[17] If Claire's reasons are unchallenged, she is hindered from being able to employ an evaluation of reasons, which might result in a more accurate understanding of racism.

In addition to civility possibly omitting stigmatized students' voices, Mayo contends that such suppression produces underlying hostility.[18] For instance, the hostility that was produced by not discussing points of contention between Claire and students of color in the classroom prompted much of the class to disengage from the discussion. Enactment of civility in my class did not cultivate the "critical spirit,"[19] but rather diminished the potential for students, specifically Claire, from engaging in a well-rounded critical thought process. On the one hand, civility functioned to possibly silence students of color because they may have felt that their reasons were unacceptable. On the other hand, however, Claire's use of so-called civil comments to disassociate from racism inhibited her from engaging in a reasons assessment that evaluated both reasons for and against her own beliefs. I am not implying that any students, whether subordinately or dominantly positioned, lacked the capacity for critical thinking, but rather the inability of the classroom climate to address emotional reasons deterred students, especially those who are in privileged positions, from engaging in a comprehensive reasons assessment. Arguments, then, that claim civil displays of respect "protect socially-disadvantaged people from having to cope with the emotional exhaustion of others" uncivil remarks, takes for granted the emotional dimension of feeling obligated to engage civilly in discussions that may produce feelings of annoyance, contempt, and so on.[20] Hence, I contend that students' performance of civility to appease the classroom social dynamics, especially when the students are harboring hostility, potentially weakens, if not entirely obstructs, students' disposition towards critical thinking.

The Cognitive Role of Emotions in Critical Thinking

As I reflect on my classroom example, there seems to be an association of uncivil behavior with emotionally-motivated reasons. For example, many students of color explained to me the fear that their reasons were not appropriate for the classroom because they might be construed as anger. Claire's comments, however, which did not express anger, it seems were also possibly concealing emotions. For example, why did she feel that she needed to disassociate herself from racism? She might have been feeling guilt, sadness, or remorse regarding racism. It seems, then, that critical thinking in the social justice classroom could be enhanced if the connection between uncivil behavior and emotions were disrupted. Such interruption necessitates that social justice educators acknowledge that emotions are essential tools in the process of critical thinking.[21]

Do emotions motivate critical thinking? Catherine Elgin and Elizabeth Anderson have both asserted that emotions have the ability, when recognized and assessed, to provide information that could otherwise be overlooked.[22] Emotions are not unprompted reactions, but rather are responses which are motivated by events, people, and so on. If we acknowledge the presence of emotions, "we can correlate emotional reactions with the events that trigger them … and use those reactions as sources of information about the environment."[23] For example, if the students of color were able to voice their emotionally-motivated reasons, such reasons could have potentially promoted emotions from white students, like Claire, that could enable them to access feelings of fear or blameworthiness that, in turn, might have

facilitated a more in-depth reasons assessment. Claire's comments of disassocia-tion, if explored more fully in the classroom, may provide insight into possible feelings of blameworthiness. Yet, because she did not recognize how comments like "my best friend is black" are emotionally motivated, critical thinking regarding her reasons is limited. Elgin explains that blameworthiness has the capability to acquaint individuals with past and future information. Subjects must examine the past because such guilt highlights instances where one may have "contributed to the misfortune." Reflecting on the past, calls for one to focus on the future, to understand how one's feelings guide one's "obligations and opportunities, and [one's] sense of [self] as a moral agent with on-going relations to other moral agents."[24] If Claire acknowledged her feelings of blame, which are recognizable in her statements of disassociation, she may have assessed possible actions or beliefs that may have made her complicit in racism, but, more importantly, she could focus on assessing reasons for changing her beliefs that could prompt acting in more just ways. By valuing the cognitive role emotions serve in the social justice classroom, which is to provide access to evidence that may otherwise be neglected, emotional responses can be disconnected from "uncivil" behavior. Emotions like remorse, guilt, or anger are often read as disruptive or impolite, and can be recognized not as irrational, but "perhaps even indispensable for cognition."[25]

While I have asserted that emotions have a cognitive role in enhancing critical thinking, do general emotions encourage critical thinking about social justice? Claire's recognition of her emotions of guilt might prompt reflection on her past beliefs and advance a critical analysis, but do such reflective processes encourage social justice? If power dynamics between dominant and stigmatized students are going to be disrupted to produce more equitable and, potentially, critical conversa-tion, I urge not only the incorporation of general emotions, such as sadness, happiness, or anger, but also "outlaw emotions." "Outlaw emotions" are most often experienced by marginalized populations who, because of discourses of civility, are denied voice in the classroom. Emotive responses that might be classified as "outlaw" would be those that indicate nondominant perspectives, such as feminist, critical, and antiracist points of view.[26] Such emotions differ drastically from dominant views of the emotions it is appropriate to feel under the circumstances, thus, the inclusion of "outlaw emotions" in the classroom "may enable us to perceive the world differently than we would from its portrayal in conventional descrip-tions."[27] Potentially, then, "outlaw emotions" may enable a social justice classroom to increase the strength of reasons provided for understanding racism systemati-cally. For example, students from different racial backgrounds often have different descriptions of the functions of racism that are unintelligible within normative frameworks and, as such, might engage students in critiques that question those foundations. Inclusion of such emotions may increase students' disposition towards critical thinking and social justice.

UTILIZING "UNCIVIL" EMOTIONS IN THE SOCIAL JUSTICE CLASSROOM

As I reflect on my own position as a student and teacher, I admit that it is somewhat frightening to think about the numerous dilemmas that could occur when

emotions are unleashed in the social justice classroom. For this reason, I am not asserting that we abolish civility, but rather we must be critical of how norms of civility operate in the social justice classroom. Do employments of civility silence students or promote effective dialogue? As I have argued in this essay, civility, which may manifest as politeness, can often silence marginalized students from voicing reasons. Such expressions of civility maintain the status quo and defeat the purpose of social justice courses. As Laverty contends, some forms of civility, such as "robust" civility, "balances self-directed thinking with other-directed thinking; it balances concern for another's feelings with concern for his or her well-being; it balances a commitment to being truthful with sensitivity for the situation and individual."[28] The type of "robust" civility, Laverty asserts, is an important element to a classroom that welcomes emotions. In order for "robust" civility, which goes beyond simply maintaining happiness, to avoid reifying oppressive social contexts, however, one must also recognize the importance of emotions that may not correspond with emotional norms of civility, such as anger. Such recognition requires a reconfiguration of classroom power dynamics and the critical thought process.

Acknowledging emotions in the classroom requires social justice educators to provide a curriculum that encourages what Ann Berlak calls confronting and mourning trauma.[29] When speaking of trauma, I am speaking of "massive, painful, isolated events outside the normal range of human experience and to daily insidious and persistent events that continue to re-injure the wounded."[30] Educators need to provide examples that enable dominant students to gain awareness of and confront systems of oppression which dominant students are, consciously or unconsciously, complicit in. Dominant students' exposure to trauma may cultivate genuine "moral deference" — "an attitude of respectful listening" — that transcends uncritical civility.[31] The point of such trauma is to encourage a recognition of emotions which, in turn, provides critical reflection of feelings — mourning. Berlak explains, "Mourning is a process of naming and confronting one's own and other's suffering, of recognizing and coming to terms with loss."[32] Through the back-and-forth process of trauma and mourning, dominant students are required to confront feelings of anger, guilt, shame, sadness, and so on that enables them to "hear and respond empathetically to, rather than erase," the emotions of marginalized students.[33] Such a process of trauma and mourning is evident in *The Color of Fear* where a white man, David, is forced to hear the anger of Victor, a black man.[34] While it took time for David to begin to recognize how his distancing responses, which often blamed Victor for racism, were guided by his own fear of being complicit in racism, he eventually started to listen to the pain Victor was expressing. In order to get to a point where "robust" civility can help enhance the classroom's critical thought process, students, particularly dominant-white students, must partake in a back-and-forth process of trauma and mourning.

Promoting a classroom environment that fosters the disruption of social hierarchies and the presence of non-normative emotions necessitates an expansion of critical thinking. That is, we must conceive of critical thinking and the emotions

provoked through such reflections as a social project. As Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk claim, critical thinking "is a function of collective questioning, criticism, and creativity, it is always social in character, partly because relations to others influence the individual, and partly because certain of these activities (particularly thinking in new ways) arise from interaction with challenging alternative views."[35] A communal view of critical thinking is essential to the social justice classroom because it moves from an individual to communal focus on beliefs and actions. For instance, Claire was most concerned with how the material positioned her within racism and not with how her responses impacted the other members of the class emotionally. I am not advocating that we dismiss individual reflection about emotions, but rather the critically-reflective thought process must also include a communal element. Through sharing our emotions and emotionally-based reasons and experiencing those of others, we can create a more just, critical-reflection process and, in turn, encourage social justice.

Elevating critical thinking to a communal endeavor enables social justice educators to highlight the social and historical backgrounds that inform assumptions that often maintain the status quo. In this sense, the social justice classroom needs to be understood as a "community of negotiation," a place where "persons are willing to negotiate their positions within … interpretive communities."[36] Thinking back to my opening example, many of us entered the classroom with the intent of collaboratively sharing our experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs. It was only once students feared being construed as "uncivil" that the dialogue shut down. Claire did not want to incur social disapproval from her peers of color and the students of color may have felt that any response, be it emotional or not, to Claire might be inappropriate. Perhaps if we were willing to risk exploring our fears, our emotions, to feel in the name of social and political change, the classroom would have provoked more nuanced conversations about racism and, in turn, reasons that direct more just beliefs and actions. The project of critical thinking in the social justice classroom, then, requires a willingness to mutually reciprocate listening and sharing. If social justice classrooms are going to encourage social and political change, the classroom environment must emphasize, as Audre Lorde so eloquently explains, "I feel, therefore I can be free."[37]

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1. For anonymity purposes, I have changed the student's name to Claire.

2. I understand that I am constructing a dichotomy in this essay between white/black or privileged/marginalized students. While I do believe such categorical distinctions are socially created and, in turn, arbitrary, I have constructed this dichotomy to highlight how these identities have very "real" implications for classroom social dynamics.

3. Cheshire Calhoun, "The Virtue of Civility," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2000): 259.

4. Calhoun, "The Virtue of Civility;" and Megan Laverty, "Civility, Tact, and the Joy of Communication," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 228–37.

5. Elizabeth Higginbotham, "Getting All Students to Listen: Analyzing and Coping with Student Resistance," *American Behavioral Scientist* 40, no. 2 (1996): 205.

6. Sara Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 1 (2009): 44.

7. Sara Ahmed, "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 35*, no. 3 (2010): 571–94.

8. See Kim A. Case and Annette Hemmings, "Distancing Strategies: White Women Preservice Teachers and Antiracist Curriculum," *Urban Education* 40, no. 6 (2005): 606–25.

9. Cris Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race, and the Lure of Beautiful Manners," in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 78–87.

10. It could be argued that civility hinders subordinate students from fully engaging and, in turn, preventing them from wholly participating in the project of critical thinking; however, I do not address this issue in this essay.

11. Harvey Siegel, "Cultivating Reason," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Randall Curren (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 306.

12. Harvey Siegel, "The Reasons Conception," in *Philosophy of Education, An Anthology*, ed. Randall Curren (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 439.

13. I am aware of arguments, such as those presented by Elizabeth Ellsworth, that assert that critical thinking and critical pedagogy have failed to take into account the voices of subordinate populations because such thinking has been linked to the history of rationalism. However, I maintain that one's ability to evaluate evidence is a crucial part of critical thinking. That is, one's willingness to evaluate reasons for and against one's own beliefs, judgments, and actions is a necessary part of the social justice classroom. It is only through such critique that one is potentially able to recognize the fallibility of one's own reasons and potentially act in accordance with reasons that lead to more just beliefs, judgments, and actions. See Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't this Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297–324.

14. Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents," 79.

15. Case and Hemmings, "Distancing Strategies," 615–18.

16. Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity," 49.

17. I am not contending that civility is the sole reason for stigmatized students' silence. For instance, some students of color may remain silent in social justice courses because any response could recenter white students' needs and, in turn, tokenize the students of color. See Deanna Blackwell, "Sidelines and Separate Spaces: Making Education Anti-Racist for Students of Color," *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 13, no. 4 (2010): 473–94.

18. Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents," 84.

19. See Siegel, "The Reasons Conception," 439.

20. Calhoun, "The Virtue of Civility," 266.

21. Barbara Thayer-Bacon, "Doubting and Believing: Both Are Important for Critical Thinking," *Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1995): 59–66.

22. See Catherine Elgin, "Emotion and Understanding," in *Epistemology and Emotions*, eds. Georg Brun, Ulvi Douolu, and Dominique Kuenzle (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2008): 33–49. Also, Elizabeth Anderson, "Uses of Value Judgments in Science: A General Argument, with Lessons from a Case Study of Feminist Research on Divorce," *Hypatia* 19, no. 1 (2004): 1–24.

23. Elgin, "Emotion and Understanding," 35.

24. Ibid., 41.

25. Georg Brun and Dominique Kuenzle, "A New Role for Emotions in Epistemology?" in *Epistemology and Emotions*, eds. Brun, Douolu, and Kuenzle, 16.

26. Allison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion In Feminist Epistemology," in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (New York: Routledge, 1997): 396–97.

27. Ibid., 397.

28. Laverty, "Civility, Tact, and the Joy of Communication," 235.

29. Ann Berlak, "Confrontation and Pedagogy: Cultural Secrets, Trauma, and Emotion in Antioppressive Pedagogies," in *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence,* ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 123–44.

30. Ibid., 134.

31. Sylvia Burrow, "The Political Structure of Emotion: From Dismissal to Dialogue," *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (2005): 27–43.

32. Berlak, "Confrontation and Pedagogy," 139.

33. Ibid.

34. Lee Mun Wah, *The Color of Fear* (Berkeley, Calif.: Stir-Fry Seminars and Consulting, 1994).

35. Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk, "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits," in *Critical Theories in Education: Changing Terrains of Knowledge and Politics*, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999), 62.

36. Burrow, "Political Structure of Emotion," 38.

37. Audre Lorde, ed., "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1984), 38.