



Pursuing Inclusion and Justice While Affirming the Mental Health of Marginalized Students

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Abstract: This article provides best practices that instructors can use to affirm and support marginalized students' mental health with a specific focus on students of color. Recently, campuses have witnessed renewed calls for diversity and inclusion in the wake of anti-Black violence. Advocates have called for needed structural changes. To build upon these calls for change, this article provides instructors with tools they can use in the interim to navigate questions of diversity, inclusion, and justice in the classroom. The essay centers the mental health needs of students from marginalized populations to hedge against the possibility that efforts to foster inclusion, including advocating for structural reform, contribute additional trauma to these students.

Introduction

The ongoing hardships of COVID-19, microaggressions, police brutality, and the resulting conversations around critical race theory have sparked a resurgence in university efforts to promote diversity and equity. Yet, much energy and conversation about promoting inclusion and justice only occur after traumatic events and fail to attune explicitly to the needs of marginalized students. After George Floyd's tragic death, many universities and departments released statements affirming the significance of diversity and inclusion but failed to consider and affirm the mental health of students of color.

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As educators, we must prioritize the mental health of students. College students already have a high risk for anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. The pandemic, ongoing oppression, and continuing trauma only exasperate these risks, and the number of students who report mental health challenges continues to increase (McAlpine, 2021). Educators must act to support students' mental health, especially students who continue to face disproportionate marginalization, at times even within the classroom. When entering our classrooms, students may be navigating a recent experience with sexual violence, yet another microaggression, government officials legislating which bathroom they can use, or new trauma from yet another video of violence against people of color. Moreover, as scholars in the discipline continue to publish and assign articles in the wake of #CommunicationSoWhite (Chakravartty et al., 2018) and the Distinguished Scholars controversy (see Kynard & McCann, 2021), it remains imperative for instructors to consider how this critical work will influence students and how to teach the literature on inclusion and access in inclusive and accessible ways.

The best practices provided in this essay enable instructors to remain proactive in pursuing inclusive and just classroom spaces while simultaneously centering the needs and mental health of students from marginalized backgrounds, focusing primarily on students of color. Instructors must proactively address persistent gaps for supporting historically marginalized communities and their mental and emotional health and their "greater unmet mental health needs compared to students of privileged positionalities" (Lipson et al., 2018, p. 348). Although structural reforms at the university remain a must, this essay explores what instructors can do when structural reforms become stalled or watered down. Even when universities succeed in cultivating systematic and structural changes, such as expanding their allyship trainings programs and their mental health services, instructors still have a critical role to play in ensuring that the classroom space does not produce additional trauma for students. As such, we emphasize how instructors can cultivate more just and livable spaces in the classroom as both injustices and needed reforms continue outside of the classroom. In doing so, we extend the conversation started in *Journal of Communication Pedagogy* in its special issue on pandemic pedagogy, adding to the impressive list of recommendations provided in those articles about how instructors can assist students in navigating mental health challenges as the COVID pandemic persists.

This essay posits several potential shortcomings to current approaches to diversity, equity, and justice in higher education and provides recommendations that instructors can use in the classroom to hedge against these shortcomings. We view survival as an act of resistance, so we aim to provide recommendations to support mental health and well-being in the classroom as injustices continue around us and in our classroom spaces. As a research team, we represent a variety of identities, but we all have experiences with mental health that inform our focus on cultivating learning spaces that affirm mental health. The first author is a Black, cisgender, middle-class, queer woman who lives with anxiety and depression. The second author is a White, cisgender, straight woman who lives with generalized anxiety disorder. The third author is a White, cisgender, middle-class, gay man who lives with post-traumatic stress and depression. The first two authors were graduate students when we wrote this essay, and the third author was an assistant professor. We use our shared experiences with two courses we had together to illustrate how affirming the mental health of marginalized students might look like in practice.

Generally, when universities and public institutions aim for diversity, they center their focus on educating historically privileged, and especially White students, at the expense and comfort of these diverse communities. For example, White students typically benefit the most from efforts to promote

diversity, because diversity efforts provide them the opportunity to learn how to interact with people of different backgrounds and cultures (Hikido & Murray, 2016). In addition to providing the most benefit to privileged students, diversity and inclusion efforts often fail to consider the mental health needs of marginalized students or, worse, add to the mental health challenges of these students. Marginalized students face emotional and psychological burdens simply for living in an oppressive society that devalues their life. Specifically, students of color must also navigate systemic racism and its daily reminders, through the flood of imagery via news and social media depicting Black bodies in pain. Living in an unequal society as a target population takes an emotional toll. Living with systemic racism is tiring and exhausting (Landertinger et al., 2021). Students of color and other students on the margins face additional stress and mental health challenges as they navigate microaggressions, harmful assumptions about their academic skills, toxic environments, and exposure to images of violence against people who share their identity (Cox et al., 2011, p. 118; Smith et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Continued microaggressions put minority students in psychological, physiological, and behavioral distress, producing a wide variety of reactions including but not limited to feelings of helplessness, and irritability, fatigue, isolation, poor performance at work or in school, and changes in appetite (Franklin et al., 2014). Although universities do work to address these mental health concerns, inclusive approaches to provide student support often do so without taking the necessary considerations for the experiences of students of color and historically marginalized groups they impact. Instead, universities and educators should attempt to foster spaces that both recognize the need for education about diversity and take extra considerations for how their efforts to promote diversity may uniquely influence the mental health of the marginalized groups they seek to help.

Yet, we also echo Bettina L. Love's (2019) call: "we want to do more than survive." This essay provides best practices for affirming mental health of students experiencing oppression and marginalization; the practices will hopefully help students and faculty members survive as higher education grapples with injustice. Yet, the best practices themselves are not sufficient to confront this injustice. Many proposals are aimed at cultivating inclusion and just focus on larger structural changes. Structural changes matter, and proposed structural changes include building up counselling centers by hiring therapists of color, developing professional development opportunities for faculty of color, creating spaces to celebrate Black life, and building relationships with high schools that have predominant student of color populations (Landertinger et al., 2021). We also encourage active efforts to foster inclusion and justice through allyship and bystander intervention trainings, revamping curriculum and scholarly agendas to ensure it is responsive to the needs of diverse student bodies and addressing systems of patronage that reinforce privilege and foster exclusion (Corrigan & Vats, 2020). Although space does not allow us to unpack these transformative actions further, we strongly encourage people to engage with the Building the Fugitive Academy conference's seminars available online (Building the Fugitive Academy Organizing Committee, n.d.).

We must note that instructors are already in the classroom and cannot wait for universities to enact these changes. Structural changes require time, resources, and multifaceted contributions from faculty members and campus staff to accomplish. Universities might fail to enact the structural reforms. Although these proposals certainly matter significantly, they do not provide guidance for faculty members working to cultivate inclusive classrooms in the interim and when universities fail to create change. Instructors would benefit from learning tangible ways to focus on marginalized students' well-being as larger campus conversations about diversity and justice continue. Even when institutions succeed in creating structural change, instructors still must learn how to affirm and support marginalized student's mental

health and work to avoid retraumatizing students in the classroom. As such, this essay offers suggestions for how instructors can implement these considerations on a classroom level so that they can promote diversity in education while taking the mental well-being of the marginalized students they impact into consideration.

Recommendation #1—Intentionally and Explicitly Address Emotional Labor

Instructors should assess the emotional labor required of marginalized students when determining how rigorous their class is. Instructors often solely evaluate a course's intellectual rigor, but when discussing topics that have a component of violence or trauma, emotional labor is a factor that cannot be ignored. Attuning to emotional labor starts before the semester begins. First, instructors should recognize that students with racially marginalized identities in general who attend HWCUs (Historically White Colleges and Universities) face additional emotional labor in the campus environment because of their identity and this does not get left at the door when they walk into a classroom (Evans & Moore, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021). Froyum (2014) asserts that studying issues related to race “evokes unique emotions to manage” with students of color potentially feeling anger and frustration or even depression (p. 82). Instructors should find ways to account for emotional labor that can come with homework and in class discussions where topics are heavier.

Second, instructors must assess how emotionally taxing and potentially triggering their reading lists for courses could be. Communication Studies scholars have published a multitude of exemplary articles that provide insight into the relationship among communication, oppression, and inclusion. Instructors should assign work about, for example, Matthew Shephard's murder (Ott & Aoki, 2002), White supremacy and racial violence (Ore, 2019), and sexual violence (Pollino, 2020). However, instructors must remain aware of how scholarship itself can retraumatize students and require additional emotional labor. For example, in our classrooms, we work to ensure that whenever we assign an emotionally laborious article, we require less total reading that week for the class to help counteract the emotional labor required to engage the readings. This allows for students to process the demanding topic without an additional heavy workload on top of the emotional labor they are being asked to perform.

At the beginning of the semester, instructors can intentionally set expectations and boundaries around emotional labor with students. Preemptively alerting students to potential stressors in course content and discussing how students can set boundaries with the subsequent emotional labor will enable them to make informed decisions about course enrollment and how to care for themselves. Instructors can do this by providing trigger warnings about material that may invoke negative personal or psychological responses and/or retraumatize students, including material about racial violence. Trigger warnings help students engage fully in their education and provide them with the freedom necessary to navigate and avoid trauma (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018, p. 107). Additional boundaries may include: (1) informing students about places students may skip over in readings that deal with racial trauma, (2) providing space to mute their audio or turn off their camera on Zoom/taking a break after content is covered, (3) informing students that they can leave the classroom during difficult conversations, and (4) providing a pause before and after heavy conversations to acknowledge the emotional weight of the material instead of a purely theoretical or methodological discussion. Conversations about race, justice, and equality must occur in ways that do not place additional trauma and stress on people of color, especially in educational spaces like the classroom. Viewing course content and having these conversations without acknowledging the emotional labor and personal trauma students may experience risks

both stereotyping the strength of students of color and falsely assumes a separation of major events surrounding racial injustice and students' personal identities. By providing trigger warnings that can acknowledge emotional labor concerning content concerning identity-related stressors, instructors can express empathetic concern that may validate and encourage students to take the necessary precautions when approaching this content.

Recommendation #2: Teach Inclusive Stress Management Techniques

Instructors should also tell students that their primary responsibility is to care for themselves and their mental health. In our class, we established that the “first rule” of the semester was to “take care of your glow” (see Hester & Squires, 2018), and we repeatedly reminded each other of this phrase throughout the semester. In addition to establishing the importance of one’s mental well-being in the classroom, we also encourage instructors to include lessons about managing stress and other mental health challenges as a part of the course content. Instructors should also adapt stress management techniques with explicit focus on historically excluded student populations, including students of color and trans students. Several typical stress management activities like going for a walk or car ride entail a different level of risk depending on one’s race and ethnicity (Landertinger et al., 2021). Similarly, trans students may not feel safe enough in restrooms for anxiety-reducing techniques that involve gathering oneself in the restroom. Instead of sharing these techniques, instructors should promote more inclusive stress management practices in the classroom. For example, box breathing and finger mustache exercises remain relatively more inclusive. Box breathing involves inhaling for 4 seconds, holding one’s breath for 4 seconds, exhaling for 4 seconds, pausing for 4 seconds, and then repeating the process. When completing the finger mustache exercise, one should press on the pressure point at the base of one’s nose with one’s finger and then begin taking several deep breathes. Using time at the end of an in-class discussion to decompress and focus on something lighter is also a way to account for emotional labor. Something as small as creating a “feel good” playlist collectively as a group that can be shuffled for the last 5 minutes of class can help students transition out of a more negative emotional headspace. In our course, we routinely completed our deep breathing exercises for the last 5 or 10 minutes after discussing emotionally difficult material. Providing a clear mental end point can help students recenter before they leave the classroom and hopefully counteract at least some of the emotional labor they had to do in class.

Recommendation #3: Provide Internal and External Support

Communication Studies instructors likely do not have expertise about the mental health challenges students face, so instructors should balance providing internal support in the form of listening to students and connecting students with other resources. Connecting students with external resources can also help reduce the emotional labor that instructors must use to navigate issues of oppression that they experience. First, listening remains a highly applicable skill taught in communication classrooms, but how instructors teach this skill and execute it themselves when interacting with students is crucial in creating an equitable classroom. Empathetic listening shows the speaker that listening is occurring through active verbal and nonverbal cues. Empathetic listening also centers on working to understand the speaker’s point of view or experience (Wilde et al., 2006). In classroom discussions, emphasizing listening to understand rather than listening to respond is important especially when marginalized students might be sharing traumatic or triggering things that happened to them. An example of this could be a student talking about hearing slurs or having slurs directed at them on campus. Although many will not have experienced that specific situation, it is important for instructors to encourage the

class to listen from the perspective of believing that student's lived experience. Instructors too should validate students' experiences by showing they have listened to what they have to say and care about how they feel. By modeling this behavior, instructors can foster a climate of acceptance and understanding in the classroom, in addition to instructing students to use the skill of listening outside of the classroom.

Second, instructors should use course documents and assignments to connect students with support and opportunities to create change. Student groups offer support and community that can enable academic success, communication skills, and a more positive sense of self (Kuk et al., 2008). For students of color, student groups foster a sense of belonging, support systems, and opportunities to pursue change on campus—all of which contribute to student success and retention (Museus, 2008). To facilitate student participation in these groups, instructors should provide information about campus student groups on their course page and in the syllabus. Especially in classes that have informative presentations, such as the public speaking classroom, instructors could design assignments around raising awareness about student groups and community organizations (Ruiz-Mesa & Hunter, 2019; Sanford, 2018). For example, the third author designed an informative speech assignment where students shared information about resources that students could use to help address food insecurity, mental health challenges, and career development in his public speaking course. These assignments enable students to connect with external support and develop support networks. Researching local organizations maintains the added benefit of illustrating potential career options with those organizations to students. The assignment enables students to learn about the current support systems at their institution, the limitations of those networks of support, and decipher the best avenue for change moving forward (see Olson, 2018). For example, if support groups do not exist on campus, the instructor can develop them or include assignments, such as a persuasive speech or debate, that advocate for their development on campus. Instructors may also consider forming student groups that will provide marginalized students with additional support; for example, the instructor could create a “student of color meet and greet” to provide space for students of color in all their sections to connect with each other and foster community outside of the classroom. Instructors can even provide students with information about mobile apps that can help students develop deep breathing practices and track their mental health status (see Chittaro & Sioni, 2014). When instructors encourage students to care for their mental health, they should remain inclusive in these recommendations and contemplate how certain students may not have the same access to stress management techniques as others. As much as instructors may wish that they will provide ample support to students in their inclusive classroom setting, instructors should recognize the limitations to the classroom environment and help connect students to support and affirmation in other settings.

Conclusion

This article posits that instructors must equip themselves with tools to support marginalized students' mental health as colleges and universities continue to debate and address issues related to diversity, inclusion, and justice. Instructors are not alone in their need to address the mental health ramifications of oppression. Colleges and universities share a need to address mental health challenges related to oppression and efforts to curtail it with other organizations. Businesses and nonprofits likely face a similar dynamic to institutions of higher education; like students, employees and clients must navigate trauma and mental health challenges. Recent and ongoing conversations about the “Great Resignation” underscores this point; employees continue to experience burnout and related mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Thompson, 2021). Although we framed our recommendations as being for instructors, business owners and managers too could implement these strategies to help employees

and clients, especially when their organization directly discusses inclusion and when traumatic events occur. The recommendations can enable anyone to remain proactive in affirming and supporting those navigating trauma and their mental health.

Especially in the wake of tragedy, discussions about diversity and inclusion can retraumatize students. As advocates continue to push for structural and systematic changes, instructors still must proactively pursue diversity and justice in the classroom in the interim. This article's recommendations allow instructors to do precisely that, by providing instructors with tools that empower them to support students and their mental health.

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