Protesting Classroom Management

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In "Disengaging and Calling Upon Others Not to Engage," Barbara Applebaum asks educators to wrestle with the epistemic politics that underlie the social phenomena of "being canceled," as well as the social echo chambers that facilitate it.[1] Applebaum acknowledges that the public shaming and calls for punishment associated with cancellation are barriers to those pursuing democratic dialogue. However, before entirely dismissing cancellation as morally wrong, Applebaum asks us to first reconsider how the aims and norms of democratic dialogue might be counterproductive and may themselves be unjust. To this end, Applebaum provides analytic tools for recognizing how canceling is not always a free speech violating impediment to democratic dialogue. Instead, canceling can provide insight into the ways that participants enter into dialogue as differently situated *knowers*. José Medina explains that the racist, sexist, ableist, transphobic, and colonial coding of the social worlds in which we communicate creates an unequal socio-epistemic landscape that ultimately marginalizes or privileges the knowledge of people based on their relationship to systems of power.[2] Applebaum argues that when marginalized knowers are faced with these unjust socio-epistemic realities, cancellation becomes a "necessary" and "reasonable" action.[3] In such a context, cancellation functions as a "demand for a different conversation," and a form of "collective epistemic resistance." Importantly, cancellation is not just shutting down arrogant, ignorant, and unjust modes of communication.[4] It is also forcing a change to the relational conditions of communication that offers a pathway towards just dialogue.[5]

Understanding cancellation in this way stems directly from the knowledge production of protest movements.[6] In this response I want to emphasize *cancellation as protest* while asking what it means for classroom relationships to embrace student protests of epistemic norms. Because, inasmuch as protesting students are demanding a different conversation through cancellation, they are also demanding different modes of relation. So, how can teachers be prepared for such an embrace?

In United States K-12 classrooms relationality is filtered through classroom management strategies rooted in behavioral psychology.[7] Applebaum's request that teachers take student protest seriously is a paradigmatic challenge to this norm. Behavioral approaches assume that teachers *can* and *should* make rules that ensure "desirable" student behaviors.[8] An embrace of protest removes the teacher as the sole arbiter of what is desirable and suggests that students ought to be equal partners in determining classroom norms. However, embracing protest, cancellation, and echo chambers raises questions about the relational strategies educators can use to move a classroom culture away from the dominant behavioral paradigm and toward one rooted in epistemic justice.

For Applebaum, cancellation in the classroom can be understood as necessary and reasonable under a variety of conditions. Clear examples can be found in moments when one student questions the existence of a fellow student. As a hypothetical example, imagine a classroom conducting a unit on current events. In this unit a trans student brings up any number of recent news articles about discrimination against transgender people in the U.S.[9] In the ensuing class discussion, a cisgendered white male student suggests that, as part of his personal and political perspective, he believes that there are only two genders, and that both sides of the topic are worth discussing as a class. If this comment is given unqualified uptake and protected as part of "democratic dialogue" it is a form of epistemic injustice. The comment is unjust because of the way it fundamentally challenges the trans student as a legitimate knower,[10] and by proffering a position that denies the existence and experiences of a member of the classroom.[11] What's more, in claiming that his position is a personal belief, he is speaking from a position of "epistemic arrogance" that assumes that his viewpoint is always welcome, valid, and reasonable.[12] Sarah Hoagland describes this type of arrogance as a "denying of relationality" that attempts to normalize to the point of invisibility the social-historical power inequality between the two students.[13] In other words, to allow a "both sides" discussion of trans discrimination is to invite epistemic, relational, and ontological harm into the classroom under the guise of democratic dialogue.

Cancellation, on the other hand, is a direct resistant engagement with

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the dominant social relations of the classroom. In this hypothetical scenario, cancellation could unfold in several different ways. A morally dubious method might include publicly punishing or ostracizing the offending student. Conversely, a morally defensible mode of cancellation could involve refusing to engage (and calling on others to not engage) in the line of inquiry on the terms established by the offending student. By shifting the mode of engagement in this way, cancellation can change the conversation in both content and character, highlighting the need to consider *the other* in dialogue.[14]

As a former middle school teacher who has had similar conversations unfold in my own classrooms, I am left wondering, how can a teacher successfully facilitate this sort of cancellation? What methods might allow a teacher to fully embrace protest as an aspect of classroom norms? And, how can this be done while tending to students across the divide of *canceling* and *canceled*? While I cannot answer these questions at length, relational pedagogies offer a starting point.

Central to relational pedagogies is ethically tending to the complex web of intersubjective relations in the classroom.[15] Crucial to this approach is to, in the words of Gert Biesta, "mind the gap."[16] This gap is the social space in-between students and teachers. It is the space at which meaning, learning, and understanding one another unfold. But, as Frank Margonis argues, it is in this space that historical relational patterns of power and oppression can unfold, which informs his recommendation that educators acknowledge this intersubjectivity as inherently political.[17] Teaching through a political intersubjectivity meshes with an embrace of protest. Applying this approach to the hypothetical would mean that the teacher must consider the ethical implications of the interaction for all parties involved. The teacher must recognize and work to ameliorate the epistemic injustice while maintaining a commitment to shepherding the relational conditions *toward* justice. This would necessarily involve taking the protest seriously while maintaining a relational generosity toward the offending student and the possibility of repairing the harm he caused. This is a challenging task. As Cris Mayo reminds us, "relations are difficult," and to navigate toward just relations a teacher must be pedagogically comfortable

with the discomfort associated with dealing with power inequities.[18] From this though, I would argue that a teacher cannot navigate difficult relations if they understand themselves as the sole arbiter of classroom engagement. After all, as George Yancy illustrates, we are all limited in understanding our own perceptual and epistemic habits. But this is especially true for those of us who embody whiteness, as is the case with a majority of the teaching force in the U.S.[19] This is where I see so much potential in embracing a relational intervention through protest; to share relational and perceptual control of the classroom with students. However, such an intervention would have to be intentionally cultivated in a classroom alongside cooperative relational scaffolding that would allow teachers and students to systematically move away from a teacher-centric behaviorist classroom management paradigm. As part of this, Rich Milner and colleagues advocate for building affective vocabularies with students that allow classroom experiences to be discussed on their own terms.[20] Cancellation as protest is a clear example of what can be included in an affective vocabulary. It originates with students, so it's on teachers to yield to it and work with the class to engage with the realities of epistemic injustice as part of their own relational context.

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