**Welcoming What We Cannot Imagine:**

**Sensory Curriculum in Teacher Education**

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In this chapter, I discuss some pedagogical implications for teacher education stemming from my recent dissertation (Airton, 2014) on social justice teacher education or SJTE. I define the work of ‘SJTE’ as preparing teachers to welcome and foster social difference, but it is more commonly defined as preparing teachers to practice in a way that narrows the demographic divides between privileged students on the one hand and historically underserved students on the other (see Airton, 2014). The academic field of SJTE is largely American despite having considerable influence in Canada and around the world. It is a deeply historical and venerable field, with a recognizable pantheon (e.g., James Banks, Christine Sleeter, Anna-Maria Villegas, Sonia Nieto, Carl Grant) and canon (e.g., Grant and Secada’s 1990 foundational literature review on preparing teachers for diversity, or Villegas and Lucas’ 2002 book on preparing culturally relevant teachers). Crucially, SJTE is beset by perpetual anxiety about its difference from other approaches to teacher education. In other words, if teacher educators who prepare future teachers for ‘social justice practice’ have been successful – if we have produced ‘social justice teachers’ – how do we know? How will the outcome of this work differ from the outcome of teacher education approaches that do *not* do the things prioritized in the SJTE literature?

Seasoned SJTE field leaders and more recent commentators alike have asked these questions for over twenty years (e.g., Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Dover, 2009; Gorski, 2010; Grant & Secada, 1990; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Zeichner, 2009) and found the literature wanting in empirical answers. Because and/or in spite of this absence, the SJTE literature bristles with yardsticks: principles, definitions and attributes of ‘real SJTE.’ Intended to be stable across diverse teacher education contexts, these yardsticks are held to gauge whether a program ‘truly’ prepares students for the work of social justice teaching. Here, language is often used as a proxy for the ‘real SJTE’ that has not been empirically found: for example, whether programs or practitioners use terms like privilege, oppression and systemic *inter alia* racism, or ‘settle for lesser terms’ like tolerance and equality; whether (and where, or how close to the beginning) particular topics are listed on course syllabi; whether a standalone ‘social justice’ course is listed in the calendar or, better still, required; or what words appear (and where, or how close to the beginning) in program mission statements (see Ahmed, 2012; Airton, 2014). But can the presence of these language-based clues signal that a teacher education approach is *actually, materially* about ‘social justice,’ or, that it *is* social justice teacher education and not just teacher education in social justice clothing? Moreover, can the difference between these two things ever be found?

In constructing my research problem, I argued that SJTE’s identity headache is in fact a methodological one. It is nigh-on impossible to show that SJTE is empirically different from ‘non-social-justice’ approaches to teacher education because the requisite evidence is impossible to produce within dominant positivist frameworks. ‘Social justice’ simply will not behave like a stable outcome: an end from which we can look backwards and confer retroactive value on a process now found worthy of further time and resource investment. Even if ‘social justice’ did somehow arrive, this would spell the obsolescence of SJTE because it would cease to be needed. Never the less, the everyday work of SJTE – or ‘teaching the diversity class,’ as this work is commonly and wryly characterized – carries on in the service of ‘social justice,’ something paradoxically conceived as *far* from the teacher education classroom in space and time yet *near enough* that it can be affected by what we will have done together, today. In the face of this problem, it is rather wondrous that a field with such a defining yet impossible outcome as ‘social justice’ is able to stay together and keep working when it cannot pin down the outcomes of its difficult labour. Some might say that SJTE is at risk of failure because it cannot definitively demonstrate its outcome, a message as likely to be found within SJTE as without (see Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Lahann, Shakman, & Terrell, 2009).

Instead of joining the quest for empirical evidence to support SJTE’s difference-as-existence, however, I de-centered dominant quantitative logics that privilege measurability, replicability and generalizability at the expense of the local, emergent and singular. I also de-centered dominant qualitative frameworks that tend to erase the gap between language (whether in a text or a transcript) and event as though these are one and the same. Instead of relying on what SJTE scholars write about the field and its task, I turned to neo-materialism and post-qualitative methodology (see Lather, 2013; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2013) to find out what actually, materially keeps SJTE together as an identifiable field. As I hope to show in the coming pages, this turn enabled me to argue that the field of SJTE is an *assemblage* – a provisional whole without a static identity across time and space – and that, therefore, the practice of SJTE is an *affective craft*. It is an undertaking that requires the modulation of affect, in the Massumian (2002) sense of sensation or intensity. I concluded my dissertation with some suggestions on how to do this modulation, or, how to use rises and falls in affective intensity in the teacher education classroom. The purpose of the present chapter is to report on my past four years of teacher education practice as I try to act on my own suggestions to this end and produce what I am calling a ‘sensory curriculum’ for social justice teacher education.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section, I describe my neo-materialist theoretical framework, defining assemblage and threshold, or the intensive, sensate edge of an assemblage where it threatens to unbecome itself and become other. I then describe my study’s methodology for locating the intensive thresholds of the SJTE-assemblage in real-time and feeling for what happens when SJTE threatens to unbecome: when local events threaten to move beyond what is thinkable as ‘social justice teacher education’ or what ‘social justice teacher educators’ can do or say without losing this attribution. I briefly describe my dissertation findings, focusing on what they suggest for a SJTE practice that mobilizes affect in order to prepare teachers to welcome a social difference that is not stable or static: that they cannot yet imagine. I suggest that proceeding as though ‘SJTE’ is static and generalizable means presuming static the things that SJTE attends to: forms and effects of social difference. I argue that this is less ethical than presuming everything we offer teacher candidates will necessarily fall apart. In the penultimate section, then, I turn to my own teaching practices and its beginnings of a ‘sensory curriculum’ for SJTE that takes this falling-apart as a guiding principle.

**Theory: Dipping Into Assemblages**

I found my dissertation toolbox in theories of *assemblage*, a concept originating in the ontological collaborations of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, 1996, 2004), and indebted in its later elaborations to many proponents of neo-materialism. As a theoretical movement, neo-materialism seeks to remove Enlightenment humanism and human subjects from our self-installed position at the centre of all things. The movement takes its bearings from philosophers like, as above, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, but also from feminist theorists like Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Claire Colebrook, Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. The neo-materialist turn involves locating agency in matter or substance and the processes by which it is organized, and not only in the actions of self-knowing human subjects. Rather, neo-materialists hold that matter – including that which composes the human body – acts and is acted upon in ways that precede or altogether exceed the human subject’s knowledge. In other words, we cannot isolate significance to the moment when the human becomes able to articulate an emotion or perception, or when they are able to coherently answer a question. The never-noticed and never-narrated may be just as significant as that which we can say we feel or even know. To this end, neo-materialists look to things that escape our perception, or that we can only know by the trace sensations left behind in their wake (Massumi, 2002). They also theorize the complex agency of matter itself as an actor (e.g., Chen, 2012).

Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) major vehicle for displacing human agency as the be-all and end-all of significance is the assemblage. An assemblage is an always in-process network of relations among components; it is nothing like a static verifiable entity that positivism (or even post-positivism; see Lather, 2006) can pin down, locate outcomes for, and generalize across contexts. Rather, assemblages are *locally* emergent and respond to local conditions. For my discussion of assemblages, I am indebted to Manuel DeLanda (2006) and Jeffrey Bell (2006) (see Airton, 2014 for a complete discussion of each one’s assemblage theory and how I relate them to each other). For my purposes, I define assemblage as an ever-changing network of relations among human and non-human components. These relations are relentless (always forming), unpredictable, and non-hierarchical (i.e., rhizomatic – see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Martin & Kamberelis, 2013). Because of these relations, assemblages have no essential identity that transcends space and time. Rather, assemblages have properties that emerge when their components move about: when they exercise their capacities. When thought as an assemblage, SJTE *is* the aggregated effect of what its components *do* in everyday life. DeLanda (2006) is clear that there is no linear causality (‘same cause, same effect, always’) in assemblages, as this implies an essential identity like ‘real SJTE’ which is simply expressed over and over again in a predictable way. Linear causality cannot help us to understand what an assemblage will and will not do. SJTE’s identity in its literature – i.e., as people who work to narrow various divides between privileged and oppressed groups of students – depends on linear causality: e.g., that a greater number of particularly-oriented people doing particular things will lead to a necessarily more socially-just outcome. This cause and effect chain cannot be presumed within the ontological shift enacted by assemblage theory.

Like linear causality, *internal* causality also fails here because assemblage components never act in isolation. When things happen in assemblages, this is because non-linear and external causality have produced a composite response to a provocation of some kind. For DeLanda (2006), non-linear and external forms of causality are “defined by thresholds below or above which external causes fail to produce an effect” (p. 20). In circumstances of *redundant* causality, for example, a component may be triggered but the entire assemblage may not respond. Thinking with external causality means that individual component-level explanations are redundant when accounting for the emergent properties and capacities of an assemblage. It doesn’t *matter* what ‘I meant’ by my (in)action because I was caught up with other components in producing a *material* effect regardless of my own intent or even my awareness.

Pivotally, then, redundant causality means that an assemblage can affect its own components. In assemblage ontology, no component acts in isolation; rather, it is always affected by its relations to other components. A single person’s (component’s) actions – however highly-positioned they might be in a hierarchy – have only redundant causality such that I can never be said to have acted entirely on my own. At best, components including ourselves have a *composite* agency wherein ‘what I do’ only actualizes because it can: because other components are actualizing capacities which enable this action, whether or not I am aware (e.g., the capacity could be to only notice some things and not others; I do not notice myself not noticing). Mechanisms of external causality therefore continually produce collective unintended consequences, even of actions that can be said to involve human agency. Composite agency is a useful notion for SJTE practitioners who often face an uphill pedagogical battle with students on the significance of intentionality – whether I did or didn’t ‘mean it’ – for determining harm and responsibility in instances of things like racism and homophobia. Usefully, composite agency also troubles any sense that knowing what I did (and to whom) actually matters. However, these ideas are so ontologically alien to most of us that the best way to infuse them in teacher education might not be through language and reason, but through corporeal, sensory experience. I will return here when I describe my pedagogy later on.

Having established some implications of assemblage theory for causality and agency as per DeLanda (2006), I now turn to Jeffrey Bell’s (2006) theory of assemblages as dynamic systems at the edge of chaos. With DeLanda (2006), I explained how and from what assemblages are composed, and the role of the subject-as-component within them. With Bell (2006), I will now explain how assemblages emerge, remain and die (become unidentifiable). Bell takes up the Deleuzian argument that things are never what they are, definitively. This is a direct challenge to traditional (Western) metaphysics, in which thing-identity or being reaches its fullest expression when stable identities emerge and remain unchanging such that they are ‘complete.’ The criteria for completion are often images or ideas of the perfection commonly – but not always – associated with divinity (but perhaps, in SJTE and allied pursuits, with ‘social justice’ as a more perfect ordering of the world). In transcendental metaphysics, things are *either* perfect *or* they are not, and perfection is completion. In Deleuzian metaphysics, however, being is a both/and in that complex things (assemblages) are *both* complete *and* in process. As such, Deleuze turned transcendental metaphysics on its head by suggesting that there *is* something eternal that exceeds being, but it is not a static ideal (i.e., divinity or ‘social justice’). To recall my initial discussion of SJTE, there are no eternal yardsticks. What is eternal is the both/and process of things continually changing and becoming, which Bell terms *chaosmos*.

Bell (2006) characterizes assemblages as ‘dynamic systems’ because they are always in motion, and describes them as ‘at the edge of chaos’ because they work toward a plateau in between two kinds of death: chaos and cosmos. All dynamic systems navigate the two poles of chaosmos without succumbing to cosmos/stasis through an excess of order, or succumbing to chaos/collapse through meaningless proliferation. The cosmotic assemblage dies (ceases to be identifiable) because it resists crucial adaptation to a continuously becoming world, and the chaotic assemblage dies because it loses all consistency. Completeness is not, therefore, a matter of reaching the end of a trajectory or the pinnacle of development, but of continually moving, where all movement is between these two poles. The *plateau* is the assemblage’s achievement: where it has achieved sufficient consistency to create in sustainable ways but not enough to become static. A plateau is never a final resting place or stable signifier; it is rather the middling, back-and-forth journey between chaos and cosmos. Sustainability, not radical change, is the politic implied by Deleuzo-Guattarian (1987) assemblage theory, hence their axiomatic quotation: “[staying] stratified – organized, signified, subjected – is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse which brings them back down on us heavier than ever” (p. 161). The best, most life-giving change happens by degrees and through experimentation. Social justice educators and advocates, seeking sustainable change, as I do, through gradual consciousness-raising, coalition-building and consensual resource re-distribution, are in a way acting from an implicit assemblage ontology. The pedagogical strategies in the next section are an effort to foreground this.

Importantly, the continual becoming of an assemblage *is what the assemblage is*: how it responds to provocations and stimuli *is* its identity. In other words, an assemblage *is* *what it does* in order to stay malleable-enough and stable-enough while responding to stimuli, which are often figured as lines or flows of desire, energy, or intensity (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). My dissertation study was an effort to track what happens when the SJTE-assemblage responds, in real-time, to its thresholds being triggered by a stimulus. Three Deleuzian keywords help us to understand what can happen at an assemblage threshold: territorialization, deterritorialization – both gradual – and re-territorialization, which is swift and traumatic. My own addition is using the term ‘intervention’ (as in e.g., a territorializing intervention) to describe what happens when an assemblage responds to provocation. Each of the three processes does something to a swiftly moving line or flow of desire, as above, but are differentiated by their quality: speed, force, volume, pitch, etc. In my fieldwork at SJTE-related conferences and conversations with practitioners, I identified: territorializing interventions where a flow *gradually yet consistently* became rigidly segmented – chopped up, slowed down – through a ‘gentle suffocation;’ re-territorializing interventions where wild lines of flight were blocked and snuffed out in a *swift* ‘smack-down;’ and very slow deterritorializing interventions that wavered back and forth, eventually producing *sustainable* change in the locally emergent SJTE-assemblage. My dissertation (Airton, 2014) contains lengthy examples of each kind.

**Methodology and Findings: From Assemblage to Affect**

My methodology for tracking SJTE’s emergent thresholds and related interventions took place on the surface of the field’s everyday life: in innumerable conversations, encounters and spaces shared briefly with shifting constellations of SJTE practitioners. In these moments, I mapped the unfolding experience of being ‘caught up’ in the SJTE-assemblage as something “directly compelling” (Stewart, 2007, p. 3). As such, my dissertation insists that an assemblage can be studied on the visceral plane of *affect*, or, that affect is the means by which one’s component-status in assemblages becomes apparent in everyday life. Following Brian Massumi (1987, 2002), I define *affect* as sensation or intensity that precedes our individual and idiosyncratic self-awareness, which is why we use the term ‘prepersonal’ to describe affect as something prior to what is personal, or directly about the subject (Massumi, 1987). For Massumi (2002), affect is *unqualified* intensity because we are affected long before we can narrate intensity into emotions proper to ourselves as subjects. Or, the qualified personal experience that we call ‘emotion’ is not the first thing that happens. Rather, affect precedes the (personal) experience entrenched through narration; similarly, Claire Colebrook (2002) argues that “‘affect’ is what happens to us when we feel an event” and is not “the meaning of an experience but the response it prompts” (p. xix). Lastly, affect is a fleetingness of *sensation* through which we can sense (then perhaps narrate later on) that something has happened because it has moved on and moved through us (Massumi, 2002). This change is what the subject – whether researcher or teacher – can apprehend, belatedly, through sensation. As such, Massumi defines sensation as “the direct registering of potential ... as yet unextended into analytically ordered, predictably reproducible, possible action” (p. 98). The body apprehends much more and prior to the individual subject in its capacity as a conduit and impressionable surface for autonomous, circulating affect-as-sensation.

My methodological (and, as we shall see, pedagogical) argument is that assemblages make sensory landfall directly in the lives and on the bodies of their human (and non-human) components, or, that they can be materially apparent to human experience despite their diffusion and decentered agency. Attuning one’s self to rises and falls in affective intensity as the assemblage moves around and nears its thresholds is, I argue, one way to study things that precede and exceed the words with which subjects narrate ‘my feelings’ or ‘my intentions.’ Through variations in intensity registered in and as sensation, we can come to sense when the assemblage (in which we are a component) has come to a threshold.

I will briefly describe what using affect to map assemblage thresholds ‘looks like’ as a methodology. At conferences, my multi-sensory fieldwork involved using my eyes and ears but moreover my own body as a barometre of sensation – tensions, hunches, burnings, oscillations of alertness and boredom – to follow the tone and rhythm of a situation. At times I would pause and ‘take the pulse’ of a room; this involved looking and feeling for how things were going, and how fast, how loud, how sudden: things like comings/goings, modes and degrees of attentiveness, nods, vocalizations, twitches, snacking, drinking, program flipping, looking around, fidgeting, etc. relative to what was ‘happening’ at the time. My scare quotes around ‘happening’ are intended to convey that ‘what happened’ was not limited to a speaker’s presentation, for example, but included all other movements and utterances before, within and after a session’s official timeframe. When the human subject’s agency and intentionality are de-centered, we can come to see The Event as someone getting up and leaving a room, even if ‘The Event’ itself – i.e., the reason for being there – is a keynote. The Event can actually be everything we thought would be a non-event. And then, suddenly, it isn’t: threshold.

In my conversations with practitioners, I would ask broad, open questions about their teaching, encouraging both speculation and generalization. My questions were an effort to stage the threshold of what ‘social justice teacher education’ feels like: what is authentic and good, not just good-enough or insufficiently XYZ to be SJTE. I would directly pressure the ‘sore spots’ of SJTE like evidence (my own research problem) and impostors; for example, I often asked whether practitioner intention or effect determines something to be ‘real SJTE.’ Importantly, I did not separate myself as ‘the interviewer’ but rather tracked rises and falls in affective intensity across each conversation between two or more SJTE practitioners (including me).

Using this sensory methodological approach in both conferences and conversations, I identified and mapped all three kinds of intervention described in the previous section. However, the key finding of my dissertation came from mapping *de*territorializing interventions. These interventions, I found, exemplified Deleuzian political possibilities as SJTE practitioners embraced our field’s own contradictions, sore spots, and inconsistencies, even uttering words or questions otherwise anathema to ‘SJTE people’ but present and pressing, none the less. In these uncertain and creative moments, SJTE became other in response to emerging local conditions; I found a flexibility or suppleness to SJTE that altogether departs from most of the field-defining literature. There is no one ‘real SJTE,’ clear and coherent, that unites us all across space and time. As we saw in the chapter introduction, SJTE cannot produce and make evidence of whole-field outcomes. Rather, I argued, SJTE can tolerate local and partial iterations of itself which do not use ‘our language’ but still do the work. And, pivotally, ‘the work’ is tolerating and becoming open to our own and others’ difference even from the most cherished foundations we have come to rest on and codify into language until they no longer keep up with everyday life.

Furthermore, by mapping any instances of talk about ‘good SJTE’ or what happens when SJTE is ‘going well,’ I was able to apply the above finding in a description of SJTE’s *affective craft*. Regardless of what it looks or feels like in a particular local context, the craft of SJTE involves becoming attuned to the affective barometre of one’s own classroom and finding ways in the moment to increase or decrease affective intensity in order to keep things on a sustainable, even keel. Doing ‘good SJTE’ in real-time is not ensuring that our students will be able to ‘teach for social justice,’ but modulating classroom affect to produce a plateau where slow, gradual and sustainable change (or learning) can take place for our students. This modulation can even require us to provoke forms of student resistance, whether chaotic (loud, strident, interjecting) or cosmotic (quiet, withdrawn, stifling), in order to move a classroom-assemblage back to the productive middle where sustainable change can take place.

For teachers committed to making the world less harmful toward and more welcoming of difference – both what is presently held to be different and the difference-to-come – this craft is as politically and ethically significant as any sort of conceptual, semantic or even historical mastery. As a field, SJTE practitioners should bring this expertise out of the ether of tacit contributions and directly into our work with teacher candidates. In addition to arguing that this affective craft should be *explicitly* exercised in the teacher education classroom, I also contend that it can and should be cultivated in our teacher candidates.

**Pedagogy: Modulating Affect, Producing Sensory Curriculum**

How might SJTE practitioners exercise our affective craft in the classroom? What kind of SJTE pedagogy could foster such a capacity for openness to social difference? In what follows, I describe a pedagogical approach that I am developing for this purpose. In a sub-sequent discussion section, I connect it to my dissertation’s theory and methodology.

**Part 1: The Awkward Moment.** Ever since I completed the first draft of my dissertation four years ago, I have begun the first meeting of my teacher education courses about social justice, diversity and/or equity as follows. The room is set up in a fairly conventional way with pods of tables and chairs, and an introductory slide is on the screen bearing the course title and my name. In other words, there is no way the students can doubt that they are in the right place; not only is this a classroom, but it is clearly the one in which they are expected to be. I circulate as students enter, greeting them in a friendly way and offering small talk here and there. I ensure that as many of them as possible have either interacted with me in a casual way or seen this happen before I formally begin. In other words, I produce and stabilize the expectation of an easygoing instructor with a sense of humour.

When all (or most) students have arrived and found a seat, I take up an archetypal teacher position in the very front of the room, blocking the projection screen to indicate that my presence should now take precedence over all other stimuli including my own slides. I call the class to order in a clear and authoritative voice: “hello everyone! Let’s get started now.” There is no room for ambiguity; class has now begun. Thirty-odd young adults begin to dial down their movements and conversations as the ambient noise recedes.

They wait, but I do not speak. Instead, I move my eyes over them with an easy smile, making brief eye contact with students in no discernible pattern and holding my body in an alert yet relaxed position in front of them. They become collectively more still and more quiet by degrees, as if to note a collective deficiency: they must be insufficiently ready for me to proceed.

By now, there is virtually no sound or movement in the room. And still, I do not speak nor give them direction of any kind. The thing they have done together to produce my speech has not worked. And so, without consultation or conversation, the student-body tries something else. At first, there is a quivering around the edges, like muscle fatigue. From absolute stillness of movement come shiftings-around in seats, an un-crossing of knees or ankles. Many break their gaze on me to scan their peripheral vision. Scanning gradually becomes engagement with each other. Initially tentative and then more deliberate eye contact succumbs to full-blown communication as they engage in an array of facial expressions, conveying everything from anxiety to disbelief to mirth. Their asked but unspoken questions: is this person for real? What is happening? What kind of course is this? There is giggling, then laughter, then outright speech as some students whisper and then begin asking aloud these questions of each other.

And still I do not speak.

And then, a (territorializing) threshold: a student says something, out loud, *to me*. Over the years, this first talker has either offered a greeting (hello, good morning, what’s up) or a question (how are you? what should we do?). I count a few seconds – long enough to augment their anxiety that even this last ditch effort will not produce what they desire – and then respond in an open and kindly way, either by returning the greeting or answering the question. Back from the brink, we are a classroom once again, and I am their teacher.

With my reply, the surface tension breaks: the students move and speak freely, exhaling and sighing in relief. This was incredibly taxing and uncomfortable. *It was awkward.* I join them in the exhales and sighs, moving my body around the front of the classroom as I begin to ask some debrief questions, starting with the most simple: what just happened? Chalk in hand, I write their responses on the blackboard in order to build back some trust that I will be their teacher. At first, they only talk about my behaviour: that I did not speak or move very much, that I did not begin class. With prompting, they begin to talk about their own behaviour but firmly in a register of ‘we’ and ‘our.’ It is as if their own actions are invisible to them as they focus on the collective action of the whole. I then focus on the first talker: why did you speak? Why did you say what you said? This student is often unable to identify a distinct decision that they made, whether to speak at all or what to say. It just happened. I then ask the others how they felt at that moment: were they grateful to the first talker? Yes, immensely. I ask them to imagine what would happen if even this direct address had not produced my response. Would there have been a confrontation? Would they have left? Yes, I wager, and yes.

At this point, I define five terms that we will use throughout the remainder of the course to explore topics related to social difference in schools. While I do not offer citation, I explain that I am defining these terms in the interdisciplinary sense in which they have come to be used by queer theorists over the past few decades:[[1]](#footnote-1)

* norm (n.) – unapparent (i.e., invisible) standard that guides behaviour
* normative (adj.) – conforms with the norm
* non-normative (adj.) – does not conform with the norm
* normalization (n.) – process through which X becomes normative
* normalize (v.) – to produce normalization

Once I have defined these terms and verified that their relationship is understood, I ask students to apply them to what just transpired in our class by answering a series of questions. First, I ask: *what actions were non-normative?* They are readily able to identify my own behaviour as non-normative: that I did not behave enough like a teacher. By inverting their descriptions of what I did *not* do, I sketch an emergent definition of ‘teacher’ on the board: directs students in what they should be doing, is responsive to students, makes students comfortable. This is a point of discussion in and of itself: is it necessarily the teacher’s job to make students comfortable, for example? Do their philosophies of teaching match the emergent definition they produced?

Our definition anticipates my follow-up question: *what was the unapparent norm being transgressed?* I observe that norms become apparent to us when they are on the verge of being transgressed, or when they are ruptured altogether. Because my behaviour transgressed a norm (or, neared a threshold), that norm became apparent, but it is always actively structuring our engagement with each other even as we do not notice it doing so. My third debrief question is the most important: *what actions were normalizing* (or, what kind of intervention took place at the threshold)? In their responses, students begin to implicate themselves in the process which they will come to recognize as the micropolitical mechanism for perpetuating *inter alia* whiteness, heteronormativity, settler-colonialism and able-bodiedness as we proceed through the course. Pivotally, they identify their own participation in normalization – in trying to push me toward a normative performance of teacher and teaching – as something collective: without consciousness or intentionality on their part. Their bodies were caught up in actions all the way from their initial stillness/quietness to subtle movement to eye contact to facial expressions to giggles to laughter to whispers to speech to – at long last – someone speaking to me, directly, and still unable to recall a clear moment of decision-making. Our curriculum is the sensory memory of their own unwitting participation.

Having begun to sense and now recognize their implicit participation in the process by which norms are produced over and over again in a given context, the students now prepare for the same sort of fieldwork that I myself enacted in completing my dissertation research: to take this sensory memory into the streets and into their everyday lives. The culmination of this field work is the Follow-Your-Gut Essay.

**Part 2: The Follow-Your-Gut Essay.** The Follow-Your-Gut Essay (the Essay, going forward) is a paper with three parts that revolves around what I call a ‘gut event’ in students’ lives as they move about in public space. In diverse urban settings, the best place to do their field work is public transit. And so, with our above Awkward Moment as a curricular resource, I instruct them to stay alert on their daily commute for any instance of the following:

* something that causes them to perform a double-take;
* something that they cannot wait to tell someone else about later on;
* or something that they wish their friend, etc. was also there to see.

Key here is that their body, affected and affecting, takes the lead. You cannot consciously seek out your gut event, I tell them. Rather, it will find you. Because sensation is fleeting (Massumi, 2002), they will only know that an event has transpired when it is already receding into the past: when they feel their head turning to look again, or when they catch themselves in the act of taking a photo, texting a friend or telling the story later on. Once they have noticed their event (or, registered their bodies being caught up in a collective intervention), I instruct them to write with as much detail about what was taking place around them: who, what (before, during and after), where, when, and a description of how their body reacted. In just one week, they usually have several gut events to choose from.

For the first component of the Essay, they select one event and write up their field notes into an evocative narrative. One criterion is that the reader must be able to feel our way into the event, which they are to privilege over verbatim representation (see Stewart, 2007). I expect first-person pronouns, and vivid description of their own and others’ actions, including those of the focal point person (if applicable) and others in the vicinity, as well how they felt. They are also invited to extend themselves into hypotheticals and feel their potential: what might have happened if XYZ had happened next, for example, or if the focal point person (if applicable) had appeared otherwise?

The second and third components are more reflective in nature. Students are first instructed to ‘look inward,’ or, to take accountability for being seized by the event; instead of resting with ‘anyone would think that was weird, out of place, etc.’ they must answer the question: why did this event stand out to *me*, in particular? What issues were raised by the event, and what in their own histories and experiences has also connected to those issues? How are they socially positioned in relation to the others caught up in its unfolding? After taking this ‘inward’ accountability, the students are instructed to ‘look outward,’ or, to explore others’ thinking and writing on the issues raised by the event. These sources can take any form, be they conversations had or overheard, sub-Reddits, Tweets, research papers, magazine articles, blog posts, TV shows or films. The students give a brief account of these other perspectives, and then discuss them alongside their event. In the Essay’s conclusion, they share implications for their future practice as teachers. What have they learned about themselves and what their body does, unwittingly, that they can take with them into the classroom?

Having evaluated many other reflective assignments in teacher education courses about social justice, diversity and/or equity, I am struck by the local, micropolitical specificity invited and perhaps enabled by the Essay. With all identifying details removed, here is a brief sample of what students have written about:

* After being startled by a feminine-presenting ‘cross dresser’ while scavenging for firewood in an urban ravine and immediately crafting witty text messages about the encounter, a straight cis-gender male student critiques his use of humour as a tool of gender normalization in many areas of his life, including as a teacher.
* While adopting a kitten, a vegan student becomes angry when another shelter visitor seeks confirmation that her own kitten can be brought back if need be, and then explores how her social class facilitates her staunch animal rights politics.
* A Chinese immigrant student recounts an event which triggered her own Islamophobia and traces it to scary bedtime stories about Uighurs (a Muslim minority group in China) used to frighten young children into good behaviour.
* After strong disgust at the sight of someone feeding pigeons, a student develops a critique of the human-animal divide based on her own experiences of racialization.
* A split-second double take at a punk on the subway prompts a student to interrogate her immigrant family’s overriding preoccupation with dressing to appear affluent, at all times and in all places, without exception.
* After being asked by a racialized bus driver for her transfer and seeing another White passenger explode in a racist tirade over same, a White student considers how her own annoyance could have been read as (*and been*) an expression of white privilege.
* A student is alarmed by a young man crying loudly in a phone booth and explores the complexity of her fear: part mental health stigma and part fear of sexual violence.

In these admittedly partial examples, each student both takes accountability for their participation in some form of normalization *and* refuses recourse to consciousness or intentionality as determining factors in that participation. Their event is something that *undeniably happened*, in the immediate past tense, and they are asked to consider it from the visceral, sensorial knowledge that something unfolded before and beyond their control. Unlike many common pedagogies of consciousness-raising which ask students to own up to their own complicity in things like normalization after learning about its effects, the Awkward Moment and the Follow Your Gut Essay reverse the timeline: first undeniable complicity, then reflection.

**Conclusion: Learning to Pause**

This two-part sensory curricular approach to social justice teacher education is my answer to two questions arising out of my dissertation: first, when working with beginning teachers, how can we avoid circumscribing social difference via our curriculum resources, an unintended consequence of needing objects for students to engage with before they have field data of their own? This problem is one of my motivations for designing the Awkward Moment and the Essay: that any representations I bring in of ‘racism,’ ‘homophobia,’ etc. can only prepare them to encounter the representation, and not how these problematic processes may emerge otherwise where they come to practice. My second question: how might we prepare teachers with the skills to welcome social difference as it emerges in real-time, instead of being caught up in normalization and/as re-territorialization before they can recognize what is happening? My provisional strategy is to cultivate teachers’ capacity to register a welling-up of sensation and then, quite simply, pause: pause, and then be slowly, incrementally guided by their senses in thinking and feeling through the passing intensity, including what it may mean. This is the learning objective for the Follow Your Gut Essay.

In my rendering – which is, of course, Deleuzo-Guattarian (1987) – welcoming difference demands the visceral ability to do something like ‘go with the flow’ of a particular context or encounter as it unfolds, without seeking to control it and without recourse to claims about our intentionality in so doing. This is part of pausing when we sense the welling-up of intensity as someone or something arrives (e.g., onto our bus or streetcar) to shatter our a priori expectations, which are often things we never narrated and never new we were harbouring. My hope is that, over time, the pause can become more immediate than the normalization and/as re-territorialization: that it can occur prior to the possibility of narration or reflection on *why* one feels this way or *what* invisible state of affairs is being made visible through the emergence into sensation of its thresholds.

I use derivatives of ‘norm’ in a highly processual way to cue students into how what they take for granted – the unthought norm – is actually always being produced, including via their own non-sovereign participation: becoming-normal: always in-process, produced and producing, dynamic states of normativity. After the pause comes reflection: which norm is being transgressed, and how have we always been caught up in the normalization that perpetuates its continual becoming-normative? What must the student engage with, expose themselves to, or think more about in order to reduce (but never prevent) the likelihood of their being caught up in this way in the future? Critically, the pause happens prior to the privilege confessional and its paradox: that the reasons why we might expect particular things of the other do not actually matter in the moment when the expectation is acted out against our will. Even our most changed intentions do not matter, in the sense of the material. Intentionality is of language; it is too late to the party, where affect-as-sensation has already erupted onto the scene and swept us along in a tide of normalization. Helping teacher candidates learn to ‘get out ahead’ of themselves and deprioritize their good intentions is, I argue, helping them to develop their own affective craft.

At the core of my research and teaching is this tenet: that paying attention to and learning from our own non-sovereign responses to social difference and/as the non-normative can develop the capacity to *actually enact* a relation to the other which is open to and not foreclosing of difference, both the first time and every time thereafter. This is a critical starting place for preparing teachers to create a classroom that: first, welcomes and fosters forms of difference that we cannot yet imagine but that will someday walk through their classroom doors; and, second, that is already present and yet unrecognizable. To create an open space for students to emerged otherwise from how we are conditioned to see them, and not to normalize that difference away: this, in my view, is the craft of social justice teachers and teacher educators alike.

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1. In addition to assemblage theory and affect theory, queer theory is another touchstone of my research and teaching. In the next and last section, I will further explain my use of these terms and how they relate to the theoretical framework I have laid out in the preceding sections. Elsewhere, I have begun to engage the connections between Deleuzian ontology and queer theory (see Airton, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)