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Eric J. Weiner
ericjonweiner@gmail.com

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Sequestered Spaces, Public Places

The Responsibility of Intellectuals Who Teach Within the “Safe Zones” of the Neoliberal University

Eric J. Weiner

An intransigent form of identity politics in combination with neoliberal ideology has left the modern university, if not in ruins, then lacking, at the very least, in a sociological imagination capable of making distinctions between individual problems and public issues. Within this context, *responsible intellectuals who teach* must navigate a minefield of weaponized ideologies on both the right and left. The phrase echoes Noam Chomsky’s ideas about the responsibility of intellectuals¹ as well as Henry Giroux’s ideas about teachers working as intellectuals.² Unlike the teachers in Giroux’s formulation who must learn how to act as intellectuals, intellectuals are not typically trained in pedagogy, curriculum design, or assessment. They are nevertheless expected to be effective teachers. Intellectuals within the neoliberal university that take teaching seriously are immediately confronted with pressure from the administration to adhere to market-based standards of learning/teaching/assessment, while also trying to appease a broad collection of identity-based interests that are demanding safe spaces and comfort zones within the teaching/learning context. What this means for the intellectual who wants to be responsible in the Chomskian sense—speaking the truth and exposing lies—the challenges presented from administration and student-body are enormous.

*Eric J. Weiner is Associate Professor of Theoretical Foundations of Critical Education and Cultural Studies in the department of Educational Foundations at Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey. His work explores the intersectionality of power, language, aesthetics, ideology, creativity, and schooling. He has published several articles in peer-reviewed journals, three books of poetry, and three academic books. His last book, *Deschooling the Imagination* (2015), is a theoretical analysis of the social/political imagination and the disciplinary role of schooling. Email address: ericjonweiner@gmail.com*

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In 2020, the university is a place of sequestered spaces—symbolic and real—where too many students and faculty fear discussing issues deemed to be controversial, inappropriate, or “political.” Across the social sciences/humanities, politics, religion, sex, sexual orientation, climate change, science, gender, economic inequality, poverty, reproductive rights/regulations, homelessness, race, Trump, democracy, capitalism, patriarchy, anti-Semitism, Israel, terrorism, gun violence, sexual violence, and white supremacy are just some of the “taboo” topics that today make students and even some teachers uncomfortable. At best maybe these topics are addressed by creating some kind of false equivalence in an effort to feign neutrality and keep people comfortable. Discomfort in the classroom from ignorance, tension, power imbalances, conflict, disagreement, or any degree of affective and cognitive dissonance is no longer tolerated. While it used to be considered a fundamental part of the critical learning experience, discomfort of this sort now signals a flaw in pedagogy and/or the curriculum. Learning should always feel good, be nurturing, and, above all, fun. If it’s not, then there is hell to pay.

The fear of being emotionally and intellectually uncomfortable and the strategies used to avoid it come from all over the ideological spectrum. Avoidance strategies, from the right and left, take the discursive form of accusations about political bias; political (in)correctness-gone-wild; claims of social/intellectual marginalization; censoring viewpoints (books, speakers, media) that are deemed offensive; silencing people through various forms of protest; creating “safe spaces;” and policing, through different modes of surveillance, language, thoughts, and behavior. Retreating into intellectual silos on campus and online, students and teachers find comfort and solace in group-think, shared social practices, and aligned ideologies. The cost of these avoidance strategies for the individual and the republic, is a form of idiocy, from the Greek “idiotes,” which describes a person who cannot participate in political and intellectual life because of their lack of skills, knowledge, and general ignorance about the responsibilities of civic life. At the same time the left and right are doing their best to defang the critical function of the university, most universities are now aligned with neoliberal ideology, focusing on market-based competition, branding, privatization, the de-unionization of faculty/staff, and job training. Within this toxic brew of schooling, tribalism, and ideology, students are seen (and generally want to be seen) first and foremost as children in need of protection, entertainment, and comfort; savvy and influential consumers; agile agents of social media unofficially employed to promote their schools; and docile members of the university “family.”

Identity politics and the rise of PC culture is not, of course, all bad. We know from progressives that race, class, sexual orientation, age, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, the “body” (which includes everything from hair color and height to weight and posture), geography, and discourse matter (I’m sure I left out a lot of other things that also matter, so include them in this list as well). We also acknowledge the importance of what is now called the “intersectionality” of

these identities, meaning quite simply that a person can't be reduced to just one of these things, but instead simultaneously are a cross section of all of these things. True in theory, it is unclear how in the concrete world of experience (not imagined but things that actually happen), these intersectional identities *differentially* matter across changing contexts and shifting ideological landscapes. The fluidity of experience makes taking an account of *how* these intersectionalities matter at any given time a daunting task. One could say that even if it was possible to do so in some generalizable way, it would always be an analysis stuck in hindsight. As such, its predictive powers are diminished. It is also unclear how this theoretical reach into the realm of intersectionality doesn't turn back into a new/old version of liberal humanism. Doesn't intersectionality reference what is essentially a composite representation of a universal subject wrapped in the kaleidoscopic hues of transactional identities?

But before we pluralized identity, it was used in its singular ("essential") form as a blunt and powerful instrument for the development of social movements. The power of identity to organize the hearts and minds of an organic activist constituency can't be understated. Civil, labor, gay, and women's rights movements would not have been as successful as they were had they not gained power and knowledge from the experiences of these fundamental identifications. But these movements were never inclusive nor democratic. They assumed a subject and told a particular story. Not everyone who benefited and was an active part of these movements matched the imagined subject of the official story. Women of color and poor women of color troubled the White middle-class narrative of female empowerment and solidarity by second wave feminists. Women and men of color and gay people troubled the White male working class narrative of labor. Gay people troubled the heteronormative narrative of Black nationalism. Transgendered people of color troubled gay liberation movements. Poor people troubled middle-class movements for economic opportunity.

But identity politics is not just for liberal or "left-oriented" activists as the right would have us believe. Historically people have always made appeals to a singular cultural identity as a viable form of political organizing and activism. White nationalism, as historian Jill Lepore correctly points out, is just another example—a powerful example—of identity politics.³ Likewise, Nazism's association to the Aryan "race" is identity politics. Being a recognized and associative member of the ruling political class is as much a discourse of identity as being working class. Identity politics is simply tribalism by another name. And what is true about all tribal movements is they eventually lead to some form of warfare. Sherman Alexie says it forcefully: "(The) end game of tribalism—when you become so identified with only one thing, one tribe, is that other people are just metaphors to you."

One of the challenges of working in this kind of environment is trying to manage competing claims for comfort and safety. When I was working towards my

Master's degree in literature at University of Massachusetts Boston, I was lucky to be able to take a course in sociolinguistics from Dr. Donaldo Macedo.⁴ He told us a story about a graduate seminar he taught in the 1990s in which language/literacy, power and oppression were the topics being discussed. The students were all female except for the professor and, with the exception of three African American women, all identified as Caucasian. When the African American women started speaking about their experiences of racism while also sharing with the White women in the class how they perceived them as complicit beneficiaries of that same racist system, the White women vehemently disagreed. They redirected the inquiry, asserting that patriarchy, not racism and White supremacy, was the more significant and relevant system of oppression that they should be discussing because, as women, it affected them all in a similar way. They didn't feel privileged because of their race, but instead felt victimized and oppressed by male-dominated systems and social structures. Any privilege that they might have because of their race, they argued, was nullified under the regime of patriarchy. According to Dr. Macedo, the White women then demanded a "time-out" because they said if they were forced to have a dialogue about racism/White supremacy with their African American peers then they needed an established "comfort zone" before they would speak about the issue. They said they were not comfortable addressing these issues and felt unfairly threatened and attacked by the African American women. The White women wanted a "safe space" in which they didn't have to engage with people who they felt were unreasonably angry and made them feel guilty, afraid and uncomfortable. They requested that the professor "mediate" the dialogue in a way that would protect them from what they perceived as a hostile learning environment. They wanted him to place constraints over how language was being used to describe, construct, and interpret experiences, and how body language was being used to convey anger, pain, amusement, surprise, incredulity, etc. Their request put Dr. Macedo in an untenable situation. He knew that if he were to do this the space of learning would no longer be safe or comfortable for the African American female students. In response to their request, the African American women pointed out that within the context of White supremacy *and* patriarchy they, as women of color, enjoyed no such presumption of privilege, safety or comfort. Indeed, when White people demand a comfort zone before engaging in a dialogue with people of color about racism they are leveraging the power they get, within the structures of White supremacy, from being White. For one group, what is safe becomes for another dangerous, silencing and oppressive.

My concern is that there is a proliferation of demands from across the ideological spectrum that place individual comfort over critical learning. Critical learning describes a process in which students and teachers analyze the intersectional networks of power/knowledge, identity, ideology, socio-cultural-political structures, and language within and across academic disciplines. The goal is to teach students how to think critically about social, political and cultural issues so

that they can make informed decisions in their lives across a variety of contexts, i.e., work, relationships, family, governance, economy, health, culture, environment, and education.

Within higher education, fostering critical learning is no simple task as it demands that we make students, on some level, uncomfortable. By making “the familiar strange and the strange familiar,”⁵ as Henry Giroux has written, critical teaching provokes cognitive and affective dissonance thereby disrupting the ideological coherence of thoughts and actions habituated through the normalization of hegemonic relations of power. In less technical language, critical teaching means coaxing students to think about their relationship to social, political, and cultural things in a way that potentially makes them uncomfortable. It is a praxis of what C. Wright Mills called the “sociological imagination”; that is, a way for students to theorize and interrogate how their private troubles are actually public issues. It was essential, according to Mills, that people learn to connect their personal experiences to social structures. To have a sociological imagination is to be a la Charles Lemert, sociologically competent.⁶

Critical educators do this through various pedagogical practices and curricular decisions. In plain language, many students, like fish that don’t know they’re in water until they flop out or are removed from the bowl, are unaware of how systems of thought/action condition their experiences and knowledge until they are taught about the existence of these systems. The systems, like water to fish, remain visibly invisible to students until they experience some cognitive and affective dissonance, i.e., get removed from the water. Not to push the metaphor too far, but if you ever watched a fish outside of its watery home desperately flop, writhe and twist, it’s not a pretty sight. Struggling to breath, fighting for its life, it needs to be put back in the water or it will soon die. People struggling with the effects of cognitive and affective dissonance typically don’t die (I haven’t lost one yet!), yet they might act as though they will. And like any sentient being that perceives her life is at stake, she will typically fight or flee. Neither is a great choice in the context of critical teaching/learning.

Taking these ideas up in a complex and powerful way, Alan Fox’s new play *Safe Space* had its inaugural run at Bay Street theater in Sag Harbor this summer. “Safe Space is set at an elite university and explores political correctness and the reaction to triggers on campus in America today. When a star African American professor faces accusations of racism from a student, the head of the college must intervene, setting off an explosive chain of events where each of them must navigate an ever-changing minefield of identity politics, ethics, and core beliefs” (<http://www.baystreet.org/calendar/safe-space/>).

I attended the July 19th performance and was immediately transported back to an undergraduate class I taught in 2018 in which a twenty-year-old student (and her parents) accused me of being insensitive, bigoted, and demeaning to her Italian culture and ethnicity. Like the African American history professor in the play who

is accused of violating his students' safety and comfort by having them write an essay which asks them to imagine how the founding fathers might have justified or rationalized owning slaves, I asked my students to think about the emotional investment some Italian Americans have in the "official" story of Christopher Columbus (great explorer, discoverer of America, etc.) even as the historical record is clear about the genocidal horror he exacted on the Taino people as well as other documented atrocities he oversaw like rape, torture, disfigurement, and slavery.

One woman raised her hand when I asked, a proud Italian American who grew up in a home that celebrated Christopher Columbus and saw him as a source of national and ethnic pride. We then went on to discuss how significant these "affective investments" can be for people. My question about affective investments in the story of Columbus and their ethnic, racial, national, and gendered identities was intended to provoke all the students in the class to think about how their interpretation of history is powerfully shaped by their identities or in James Gee's terms, their "primary discourse." The lesson then turned to a discussion about the statue of Christopher Columbus in Columbus Circle in Manhattan and whether students agreed with those people that wanted it taken down or whether they believed it should stay up. Finally, I arbitrarily assigned half the class to the side that wanted it down or the side that was in support of keeping it up. In groups, students were to design posters that they would take to an imagined rally at Columbus circle in support or in protest of the statue. We then "met" at the imagined location and staged a faux protest, with lots of sign waving and yelling. I quickly brought an end to the yelling and screaming and had each side articulate the reasoning behind their side's position on the matter. They had read a number of articles and book chapters that laid bare the core ideas and assumptions of both sides of this issue. And that was that. Or so I thought.

In the play *Safe Space*, the assignment, from the professor's perspective, was an exercise in critical thinking, intended to provoke students to consider the complexities and contradictions that inform the history of the United States and by extension their personal histories as well. Similarly, the focus in my course was on teaching future teachers how to effectively/affectively teach certain events in American history through artistic projects. As is true in all the courses I teach, thinking critically and creatively is at the heart of all the content and drives my critical pedagogy. In contrast to the support Columbus gets from some Italian-Americans and many other people not of Italian ethnicity, I asked them to consider how indigenous people might think about him. I also asked them to think about how they would teach indigenous people about Columbus and to think about the pedagogical implications of these affective investments from the perspectives of both the student and teacher. This means that students must think about the cognitive as well as emotional challenges of thinking critically and creatively about issues that are fundamental to the formation of their identities as well as their future students' identities.

The student who raised her hand sent me an email the next day that said she

was offended by my question and that she felt singled out and embarrassed. I said I felt horrible that she felt that way after my class and that I was sorry I did something that made her feel that way as it is never my intention to make a student feel either embarrassed or singled out. I did not however fully understand how what I did made her feel the way that she did. But feelings, as is stated in the play, are non-falsifiable, i.e., they are hers and therefore are real and valid and no one can say otherwise. I explained that the point of my question (ironic in the face of her email and her stated feelings) was to get students to be sensitive to the affective and cognitive investments that their future students will inevitably have in a variety of historical stories and historical figures. In the service of critical/creative thought, it is not enough to simply provide the most rigorous examples of the historical record but to be attuned to how students' identities have been shaped by familial associations in what might be a highly distorted or rationalized historical story.

In short, as critical thinking scholar Stephen Brookfield suggests, we have to try and understand how the emotional *and* cognitive work in concert if we want to be able to take a complex accounting of the habituated assumptions and practices that guide people's beliefs and actions. One way to provoke this critical response to habituated thoughts and actions is to denaturalize knowledge and experience, i.e., make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. These critical interventions can make some students uncomfortable. Indeed, this is the point.

But in our current time in which students are demanding "safe spaces" in which to learn and socialize, and the university imagines them primarily as children and consumers the question arises as to whether the university can maintain or in some cases reassert its critical function in a democratic society. If safety comes to mean comfort then the pedagogical act of creating cognitive and affective dissonance will be read as an attack on her/his safety. In the play, the student at one point says to the Dean that she expected to always feel emotionally safe at the college because she was told it should feel like home. Along with an opportunity to earn a degree, this is what she thought she was buying when she chose to attend the college. The university *as* home is a deleterious reduction as it makes faculty and administration *de facto* parents or some kind of extended family. One consequence of this is that students never have to grow up. A process of infantilization has been built into the very architecture of the neoliberal university and students, parents and even some faculty and administrators seem to relish the arrangement.

The email exchange with my student was followed by another that was much more caustic and directly accused me of disrespecting, degrading and demeaning her Italian heritage and ethnicity. I immediately requested an in-person meeting so we could work out our differences. In the eighteen years I've been doing this work, I have always been able to resolve any issue with a student with a face-to-face meeting in my office. I was surprised when she replied that she would not meet me because she was not comfortable speaking with me in my office. I suggested she bring a friend if that would make it a safer and more comfortable space. She

refused. At this point, I brought the Chair of my department into the conversation. She volunteered to mediate the meeting. Again, the student refused to meet on the grounds that my Chair was biased against her. During these exchanges, the student's father called the President of the university multiple times questioning why a professor was allowed to demean, degrade, and discriminate against his daughter because of her Italian heritage. The father, it turns out, was a major figure in the Knights of Columbus and, if memory serves, the head of the local Columbus Day parade committee. This, we were told, had nothing to do with their response to my lesson about Columbus.

Similar to the professor in the play, I was questioned as to what actually occurred in the class, was asked to document my recollection of the exchange, justify in writing what the intention of the lesson was and how it matched the goals and learning objectives of the class. I provided all of this to the Chair, Assistant Dean, Dean of the College, and President's office. I also brought in the head of our local union. I then received a letter from an Italian American Association threatening me and the university and asking for documentation proving that the university was committed to non-discriminatory practices relating specifically to Italian heritage. At this point, the student was no longer communicating to anyone about her issues, yet she continued not only to come to class each week, but to actively participate in discussions and activities. The student never filed a formal complaint with the assistant dean and never had a meeting with him either. She kept coming to class and finished out the semester. In the play, the actions of the student resulted in the removal of the African American professor and the forced retirement of the college's first female Dean. I am happy to report that I still have a job and am in good standing with the college and university. Tenure matters. Unions matter.

I don't know if the student ever really understood the chaos she caused by refusing to discuss, in person, the issue we were having. Instead of dealing with the conflict like a mature adult, she acted just like the child her parents and the university imagined her to be and like the female character in the play, she was able to use technology effectively, weaponize her identity, and define her emotional response to dissonance as a form of symbolic violence. Resting on the lessons learned from some iterations of identity politics, she felt victimized by a curriculum and pedagogy that sought to bring attention to the complex processes from which identities are formed. In the case of the play and my classroom, "identity politics" in combination with the diminished intellectual authority of the neoliberal university challenged the critical function of higher education.

At a light-hearted moment in the play, the professor is talking with the Dean about the student's demands that they both be replaced by people who *know* how she *feels* as a woman of Asian descent. They start thinking seriously that maybe the next dean should be a woman of Asian descent, but then they think maybe the African American women on campus would not feel represented, not to mention the Italians and Jews, or gay working class people of Haitian descent. And on and

on. The dean also questions the student's demand for the creation of segregated "safe spaces" throughout the college, based upon gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, religion, etc. "How can we critically learn about how people are thinking and feeling," the Dean asks, "if we are sequestered in our safe spaces?" The demand for "safe spaces" moves us further away from the idea of the university as, a la Nancy Fraser, an alternative or counter public sphere⁷ and as such further away from establishing the university as an institution that can support a diversity of people and viewpoints. What does it say that the "progressive" move around identity echoes some of the most reactionary rationalizations for segregation?

We all want a certain degree of safety in these troubling times. We want respect, fairness, opportunities to grow, and solid communities in which our children without fear can learn and play. But we also need to be open and able to talk about our differences and through our differences. In speaking about our differences, each tribe must accept that they might have to listen to some things that are very uncomfortable and disturbing. As Vaclav Havel said, we must learn to listen more and explain less. In the wake of #metoo, many men have started to do just that. Yet it seems that many women don't want to hear men explain *their* experiences of masculinity/sexuality, dismissing all comments as "mansplaining." No doubt that mansplaining is a problematic response to feminist critiques of toxic masculinity, patriarchy, and sexual harassment. But there is an important distinction between justifying and explaining, and I am not sure tribal discourses can account for such nuance. People must be able to explain without being accused of justifying actions and behaviors that are deemed inappropriate. We must also be able to understand the difference between justification and explanation. Tribalism makes this very difficult to do as explanations *sound* like justifications when filtered through intransigent discourses. We must learn how to be nuanced and flexible in our thinking and open to the possibility that our experiences and our emotional responses to those experiences might not be the only thing that is important to consider. We must try harder to formulate a shared ethics in which our common concerns and interests are measured within the context of our differences. For higher education to become a place in which students can critically learn, we must embrace ambiguity while using the best information and resources we have to determine, beyond true and false, what is right and wrong. Our dialogue should deepen and we must be prepared to experience discomfort when learning new ways of knowing, especially when these new ways of knowing trouble what we thought we already knew.

Moving this project forward within the context of school culture are teachers who function as intellectuals and intellectuals who function as teachers. As quite a bit has already been written about the former, I will turn to discuss some of the specific challenges intellectuals face when they teach in this environment. A good starting point for this discussion is Noam Chomsky's influential essay "The Responsibility of Intellectuals."⁸

A lot has changed since 1967, the year Noam Chomsky's essay threw damning shade at the intelligentsia—particularly those in the social and political sciences—as well as those that supported what he called the “cult of expertise,” an ideological formation of professors, philosophers, scientists, military strategists, economists, technocrats, and foreign policy wonks, some of who believed the general public was ill-equipped (i.e., too stupid) to make decisions about the Vietnam war without experts to make it for them. For others in this cult, the public represented a real threat to established power and its operations in Vietnam, not because they were too stupid to understand foreign policy, but because they would understand it all too well. They had a sense that the public, if they learned the facts, wouldn't support their foreign policy. Of course, in retrospect, we know that this is exactly what happened. Once the facts of the operation leaked out or were exposed by Chomsky and others like him, the majority of people disagreed with the “experts.” Soon there were new experts to provide rationalizations for why and how the old experts got it wrong, but not before a groundswell of popular protest and resistance turned the political tide and gave a glimpse at the power of everyday people—the “excesses of democracy”—to control the fate of the nation and the world.

Chomsky has consistently been confident that people who were not considered experts in foreign affairs were as capable if not more so to decide what was right and wrong without the expert as a guide. This is one of the things that continues to make Chomsky such a threat to the established order. He has faith in the public's ability to think critically (i.e., reasonably, morally, and logically) about foreign affairs and other governmental actions at the local and national levels. For Chomsky, the promise of democracy begins and ends with the people. He does not have the same confidence that those in positions of power will give the public the facts so that they can make good and reasonable decisions. But this does not mean that Chomsky uncritically embraces the public simply because it is the public. He does not support, nor has he ever, the cult of willful ignorance; that is, those members of the public—experts, intellectuals or laypeople—who, as Kierkegaard wrote, “refuse to believe what is true.”

He is not a relativist and thinks postmodern theory is incoherent. Truth, for Chomsky, is not a relative concept. Rather, he believes in the need for an educated citizenry that can think logically and reasonably about pressing social and political issues. An educated citizenry with free access to factual information can evaluate the information independent of expert analysis. He contends that if democracy is to have any chance of success then people have to be educated in a way that provides them the tools to be able to critically evaluate information for whether it is true and also decide if the actions that the information implies are ethical. Without this kind of educated citizenry, democracy, according to Chomsky (and many others), will surely collapse and eventually be replaced by some form of authoritarianism.

Because he is recognized, by fans and critics alike, as a leading public intellectual as well as an expert in the fields of philosophy and linguistics, some have

read Chomsky's views on the intellectual and the official role of experts as ironic at best and hypocritical at worse. But maybe the criticism arises from the way language is being used to obfuscate rather than elucidate truth. For Chomsky, the essential responsibility of intellectuals "is to speak the truth and to expose lies." From this perspective, Chomsky's issue is not with the intellectual but with those who identify as such but do not function in this way. Those who have been identified as intellectuals but do not function in this capacity are pseudo-intellectuals (charlatans) at best and, at worse, are using their authority to undercut civic agency, perpetuate the status-quo, support established power and its abuses, and manufacture consent for ideas and policies that run counter to the interests of those outside of official power. Chomsky is neither against intellectuals nor the value of having expertise but rather critical of people who use the title "intellectual" and "expert" to impose untruths and veil lies behind a distortion of facts, omission of information, jargon and/or unnecessarily complex language, a project of miseducation, censorship, and by blocking access to information that should be available in a free and democratic society.

Intellectuals, in order to be able "to speak the truth and expose lies" must understand how ideology works in the form of official institutions and everyday life. Ideological analysis is not simple and requires specific knowledge and skills. My grandfather, who had an 8th grade education and grew up a very poor, Jewish refugee from Russia, had this knowledge and these skills. He was a voracious reader and essentially self-educated. He functioned as an intellectual although his expertise was in managing a television and electronics repair store. One had little or nothing to do with the other. Yet he was committed to speaking the truth and was capable of exposing lies because of his literacy and self-education. He was not schooled, but rather was educated through his reading of history, social theory, philosophy, political science, biographies, and religion. He had a deep and wide-ranging library. Having served in WWI, he came back a pacifist, horrified by the destruction and suffering he experienced. He was also a "card-carrying" socialist, anti-racist, proud American, and active member of his synagogue. He could discern lies through ideological analyses and by reading beyond official accounts. He could evaluate whether something was right or wrong by combining his experiential knowledge with his book knowledge of ethics and morality. His literacy and library card were his keys to becoming a version of Chomsky's intellectual. What he didn't have was time. He worked six days a week and five nights. His name was Samuel Oliver Barrish (He would joke that he was a proper SOB). He was born in 1896 and lived 96 years.

In our current historical juncture, Chomsky's critique of the intellectual and the cult of expertise is still as relevant today as it was in 1967, yet complicated by a hegemonic surge of anti-intellectualism and the established cult of willful ignorance. In short, anti-intellectualism is a suspicion and outright rejection of complexity, reasoned analysis, facts, and grounded theory. From Ph.D.s to high

school dropouts and everyone in between, anti-intellectualism is an equal opportunity employer, attracting people from all walks of life who must work hard to remain wrapped in a veil of ignorance. Of course, anti-intellectuals would never acknowledge their anti-intellectualism as a form of ignorance. Rather, these people are happily members of the cult of willful ignorance, refusing “to believe what is true,” especially when what is true challenges or contradicts what they think they know.

More generally, anti-intellectualism is a state of mind; a set of social practices; a network of associations; a formation of knowledge; a Discourse; a tribal identification; a circuit of intertextual mediums that deliver content; a set of dispositions, propositions and attitudes; a structure of power and authority; and a transformative cultural and political force. In the modern university generally, and in certain colleges and departments more specifically (i.e., education, teacher-training, business, finance), anti-intellectualism has been institutionalized at an ideological level. Instrumentality rules with the power of commonsense, while the work of intellectuals is marginalized, dismissed as impractical, or considered beyond the scope of their academic and institutional responsibilities. Outside of the university, anti-intellectualism has found its champion in a president who rejects any facts that challenge his authority, while gleefully and without irony manufacturing “alternative facts” from the mantle of power/knowledge.

Anti-intellectualism of this nature arises like smoke from the fires of neoliberal capitalism, neo-conservatism, reductive masculinist ideology, certain expressions of working-class culture, intransigent forms of identity politics, positivism, and the liberal wings of academia. Within these overlapping contexts, the work of intellectuals signals a form of labor that has no recognizable value within capitalist ideology because it can’t easily be commodified (this doesn’t mean it hasn’t); carries connotations of privilege and elitism; is perceived as left-leaning and an attack on tradition; effeminate because it is disconnected from manual labor; and politically impotent because of its tendency to embrace a form of post-modern relativity.

From silos on the Left and Right, the intellectual is dismissed as out-of-touch, disconnected from the real-world problems of everyday people who are struggling to make ends meet, take the kids to after-school activities, feed their families, fix a leaky toilet, care for their elderly, and walk the dog. In bipartisan fashion, intellectuals are represented as caricatures jabbering incoherently in jargon-riddled language telling the rest of us the right way to act, think, use language, shop, watch media, use technology, and eat. Intellectuals, from this anti-intellectual perspective, are self-righteous and moralistic. Whether or not they act better, they always seem to know better. From silos on the Right, intellectuals are imagined as almost exclusively liberal and more recently as an instrument, however ineffective, of a radical socialist agenda intent on destroying capitalism, gender norms, national identity, and official history. These intellectuals should be feared but also ridiculed for being silly and politically impotent.

Against the backdrop of these representations—the good, bad, and ugly—of

the intellectual, I want to briefly discuss the responsibility of intellectuals who teach. For my purposes here, I am not concerned with the age level of the students that are being taught. I will be limiting my comments to the responsibility of intellectuals who teach in formal school settings. Although pedagogy happens through all kinds of medium and within all sorts of institutions, my comments are limited to this population of educators. Intellectuals as teachers, for some reading this, will immediately call to mind Giroux's influential book *Teachers as Intellectuals* (1988). Indeed, my thoughts about the responsibility of intellectuals who teach were stirred by his book.

His book was a critical intervention into what he argued was a hegemonic anti-intellectualism within teacher-education and the teaching profession. What he identified was a form of education that deskilled teachers, preventing them from knowing how to design curriculum and enact pedagogical practices that could challenge the official curriculum. The official curriculum was the curriculum that certain experts had designed and, as many have pointed out over the decades, primarily served the interests of the ruling class, White people, heterosexuals, and men. There is too much literature to review and cite regarding the research about the official curriculum, but suffice it to say that I think it is compelling, provocative and uncontroversial.

Teachers as intellectuals, for Giroux and echoing Chomsky, meant that they would speak the truth and uncover lies in the context of their "content-area" knowledge; the official curriculum in their schools, districts, states, and country; and with regard to their pedagogical responsibility to prepare students to be able to participate in democratic life. As one of the thought-developers of "critical pedagogy," a praxis of teaching and learning that sees schooling as a socializing institution and therefore servicing particular ideological interests, Giroux's thoughts about teachers as intellectuals add another layer to Chomsky's in that teachers, in addition to speaking the truth and uncovering lies within the context of schooling, also have an ethical responsibility to teach their students how to recognize and interrogate lies and how to create the conditions by which the truths they are learning to speak can be heard.

Teachers as intellectuals are encouraged to think about their role in the school as a corrective, if needed, to anti-democratic techniques of power. These forces, when naturalized within dominant standards of learning and teaching essentially become invisible to students and teachers alike. But instead of representing a neutral or balanced standard of teaching and curricular design, these forces have historically helped to reproduce the status quo of inequity in terms of race, class, gender, nationalism, and sexuality. As such, teachers as intellectuals who are working within the framework of critical pedagogy have an ethical responsibility to disrupt the continuity of these indoctrinating narratives in an effort to provide students with an opportunity to learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to fully participate in democratic institutions. Giroux saw the need for the develop-

ment of this new kind of teacher—the teacher as intellectual—because of how de-professionalized and de-skilled teachers were and how normalized anti-democratic ideology had become in curriculum and pedagogy. When obeying authority rather than questioning it becomes the sign of a good student (or teacher), we have moved the needle that much farther away from educating a citizenry that can be self-governing. Within the ranks of teacher-education, this move away from democratic skills, knowledge, and dispositions can be seen in the fact that the more educated many of these pre-service and in-service teachers become, the less able they are to speak the truth, uncover lies, and teach their students how to think critically about the workings of ideology, knowledge, and power.

I want to invert Giroux’s framing of the issue, not because teachers are now widely working as intellectuals (his book from 1988 still speaks to a growing problem in teacher-education in 2020), but because there are many intellectuals that teach and have no idea about what it means to be an effective critical educator. So rather than emphasize the intellectual responsibilities of teachers, I want to highlight in broad strokes some of the major pedagogical and curricular responsibilities of intellectuals who teach. I am not going to speak about those “intellectuals” that are not “speaking the truth and uncovering lies.” My thoughts about the responsibilities of intellectuals who teach are confined to those intellectuals who see their essential responsibility as intellectuals as telling the truth and uncovering lies. Bringing this commitment into the classroom and school is easier said than done.

First, there are a few different kinds of responsible intellectuals who teach. This doesn’t, in the end, affect their essential responsibilities, but it may affect how open they are to thinking critically about their role as a teacher. Some intellectuals who teach do it begrudgingly because it is a requirement of their position at a university, college, or other type of school. I call these teacher-intellectuals the “Aristocrats” as they are beholden to no one, rarely if ever wrong, already know everything they need to know, and rule over their classrooms as though it was their fiefdom. The Aristocrats are the hardest to reach because they don’t see themselves as teachers at all and think about teaching as a hindrance and beneath their work as responsible intellectuals. Even though they are committed to speaking the truth and uncovering lies, students are thought of as an inconvenience, theories and practices of teaching and learning are beneath them or beside the point, and curriculum design is no more complicated than compiling a list of books and articles about a topic. Pedagogy is reduced to some form of lecture or “Socratic dialogue,” with the Aristocrat funneling truths and uncovered lies into the empty minds of his/her students. It matters little whether or not the students learn what he/she has taught. If students learn, then that is good. If they do not, then there is probably something wrong with the students.

Another group of intellectual-teachers, I call the “Actors.” This group of intellectual-teachers loves teaching, but primarily because it provides a stage for his/

her to disseminate the truths and share the lies he/she has uncovered. The classroom is but a stage and all the students her/his captive audience. An animated and engaging lecturer, the Actor often gets high ratings from her/his students' teacher evaluations. On "Rate My Professor," the Actor is consistently praised for being cool, funny, and easy. The Actor needs this kind of affirmation and when the truths s/he shares and the lies s/he uncovers appear to make her/his students uncomfortable, the Actor works hard to soften the effect by creating false equivalences, acknowledging that s/he might be wrong, or changing the subject. The Actor is a relativist in intellectual garb and when threatened with a bad review because s/he has introduced students to uncomfortable truths about the world or themselves, s/he immediately backs off and tries to make the lies and truths relative. S/he does this through an appeal to context, perspective, complexity, and the ambiguity of theory. There is a streak of cowardice that animates the pedagogical work of the Actor. Her/his speech is often punctuated by the rhetorical strategy of creating false equivalences and dichotomies where there are none by framing the issue with the phrase, "On the one hand...but on the other hand..." Even though s/he knows that teaching students to think critically about whatever it is s/he is teaching can result in them "blaming the messenger," s/he is ultimately more concerned with being "liked" than with being a responsible intellectual-teacher. The more "likes" s/he receives, the more she performs to her audience's expectations. These may or may not support speaking the truth and uncovering lies.

The next group of intellectual-teachers I call the "Wizards." This group embraces, without irony or apology, post-modern theories about truths and lies. This does not mean that they ignore the truth or hide lies. It also doesn't mean that they don't find value in speaking truths and uncovering lies. Rather, the Wizards spend most of their time on exploring complexity through a theoretical analysis of changing historical contexts, situated perspectives of intersectional identities, post-structural views of language/signs/signifiers, and power/knowledge dynamics that are "always already" conditioning our everyday experiences. The Wizard doesn't care too much if the students don't like him/her but s/he is troubled as to why they always seem so confused. Complexity for the Wizards is not a diversion as it is for the cowardly Actor but an honest attempt to struggle with what they understand as the historicity of truth and lies. These intellectual-teachers will speak truths and uncover lies, but immediately put air quotes around almost everything in order to signal to their bewildered students the relativity of whatever truth they have spoken and whatever lie they have uncovered. Theoretically incoherent, pedagogically confusing, and ethically relative, they never seem to be able to come to any concrete conclusions about what to do in the face of the truths and lies that they have been teaching. But they are incredibly enthusiastic, creative and committed to understanding the slippery social, cultural and political conditions that construct our intersectional identities and give people and/or deny them access to real opportunities. Co-optation and commodification are real risks for the Wiz-

ards, as there are not any fixed meanings upon which to get their political footing, and frankly, the more slippery the slope, the better.

The last group of intellectual-teachers I will discuss are the “Neo-Critics.” These folks have no issue with courage, likability, speaking the truth, or uncovering lies. Critique is their “tool” of choice and they enter the classroom ready to expose not only the lies but the liars as well. The truth is something that is spoken loudly, without nuance, caveat, or the complication of intersecting contexts of time or place. If the Wizards drift too far into relativism, then the Neo-Critics can put too many eggs into the basket of modernity. Their work is both theoretical, drawing energy from a diversity of thinkers across disciplines, within “high” and “popular” culture, as well as being historical in nature. The Neo-Critics are, in the lexicon of the day, social justice warriors, the implication being that they speak the truth and uncover lies in the service of not just helping students understand oppression but by using their authority as teachers to work with students to overcome it. The line between Neo-Critics as teachers vs. activists can be a fine line that can be easily and problematically crossed.

Using their position as intellectual-teachers, they take explicit positions against racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppression and violence. They do this in the name of honesty and authenticity, arguing that students, if they know what the teacher’s position is, can argue against it. Generally astute to the workings of power, the Neo-Critics blind spot regarding inequity within the context of the classroom can be befuddling. How they take a position might be the difference between becoming the very thing they rail against, namely another force that is silencing, marginalizing, and, in its own way, oppressive to certain groups. To be an effective educator, how one represents the truth and uncovers lies has a lot to do with how deeply the students learn about these truths and lies. This is how and why it is possible for the responsible intellectual to become an ineffective intellectual-teacher. In the worst instance, the responsible intellectual in speaking the truth and uncovering lies does not in the end teach his/her students anything, but instead repels the students away from the truth, with the uncovered lies hiding in plain sight behind her/his students’ ideological biases. In short, the Neo-Critic can be, and often is, theoretically right, but pedagogically wrong.

In broad strokes, here are some things the Aristocrats, Actors, Wizards, and Neo-Critics—all responsible intellectuals—might want to think about as they design their curriculum and perform their pedagogies so that the truths they speak and the lies they uncover can be learned by the students they teach.

1. Begin with where your students are, not where you want them to be. Your students are not empty-headed, docile bodies waiting expectantly for your knowledge. They come to your class with their heads full of ideas, bodies vibrating with experiences, and family histories running through their veins. They are subjects of learning,

not objects. As such, they need to be included to varying degrees in the learning process.

2. Teaching is performative. Our voice must be calibrated to the tenor of the time, place, and people we are teaching. We must find a way to be both authentic as well as sensitive to the fact that the way we represent ourselves has an impact on how deeply our students learn from us. I don't believe we can be effective for all students under all conditions all the time. But we can try to embody and represent intellectual integrity, a commitment to their learning, a respect for their knowledge and experience, and a will to learn how they best learn. Honesty, humility and humor go a long way in creating an environment that is conducive to tackling difficult truths and lies. Conversely, arrogance, apathy, and moral ambiguity play less well.

3. We are not only located in a particular time and place, but we are located in terms of our cultural identities. When we enter the classroom, our students assign us a race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and religion. They may not be conscious of making these assignments, but they do make them and there are pedagogical implications to knowing and anticipating what these assignments are. What are the dominant meanings of these identifications in the time and place in which you teach? What are the assumptions students may have about you if they are reading and accepting these dominant scripts? Rather than ignore these identifications as though you are not indeed speaking about your topic from a particular location, acknowledge how these identifications are shaping your attitudes and perspectives about the truths of which you speak and the lies you uncover. The inverse is also true in relation to your students' relationship to truth and lies and your assignment of identities to them.

4. When speaking the truth and uncovering lies in the classroom, students will become uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. This is not only unavoidable, but desirable. However, students have to feel comfortable being uncomfortable. This is not always possible and it is certainly not an easy thing to create. Trust, tolerance, and respect are three important ingredients that a teacher needs to be adding to the classroom environment in order to have any chance of not alienating some students. When the truths you speak and the lies you uncover challenge the deeply learned lessons of a student's past, the reaction can be quite disturbing. From shutting down to aggressively resisting the veracity of the truths you are speaking about, students who are in this state of heightened anger and fear are less likely to be able to unlearn the lies they have been taught in order to reflect on the truths that you speak. It's important to

understand how disturbing it can be for students to learn truths that upset their fundamental ideas about whatever it is you are teaching them. Belief systems that were thought to be grounded in systems of truth come with a whole set of rules for behavior, thought, identity, etc. When we disrupt these belief systems without recognizing how disturbing these disruptions can be on our student's sense of identity, then we miss an opportunity to deepen their critical understanding of their relationship to whatever it is you are trying to teach them.

5. Be kind, compassionate, and realize students are in a vulnerable state in relation to the power they have in the school. Although they do have "unofficial" power to disrupt, demean, demonize, resist, refuse, deny, etc., the real disciplinary power of schooling is manifested in our authority to assess their work, determine curriculum, and structure classroom pedagogies and assignments. The deep mistrust that many students have of teachers arises from an abuse of this authority or a perceived abuse of this authority. Either take the grades off the table, or be crystal clear as to what your expectations are. But make sure your expectations for their learning are coherent in the context of your teaching. When a teacher is progressive pedagogically, but conservative/traditional in terms of assessment, there is an incoherence that tells students the teacher is not really as progressive as their pedagogy suggests. What do you want your students to know, why should they know it, and how are you going to measure their learning? Are all of these considerations consistent with your understanding of what it means to be a responsible intellectual-teacher?

I'll conclude by simply saying that becoming a consistently responsible intellectual is increasingly difficult because of the hegemony of the cult of willful ignorance in combination with the audacity of those in positions of official power who collectively lie with a recklessness not seen in modern times. This makes being a consistently responsible intellectual-teacher also more difficult. Speaking the truth and uncovering lies in a way that is pedagogically critical and transformative while being sensitive to student diversity across a variety of disciplines and school-based contexts has always been challenging. Doing it in this toxic environment of intransigent identity politics in combination with a hegemonic neoliberal ideology is not without considerable risk.

Notes

¹ <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1967/02/23/a-special-supplement-the-responsibility-of-intelle/>

² Giroux, Henry A., "Teachers as transformative intellectuals," pp. 121-128 in his *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988.

³ Lepore, Jill. 2018. *These truths: A history of the United States*. New York, NY: Norton.

⁴ I worked with Donaldo Macedo while earning a Master's degree in literature at University of Massachusetts Boston in 1997.

⁵ Giroux, Henry and McLaren, Peter. (Eds). 1989, *Critical pedagogy, the state and cultural struggle*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

⁶ Lemert, Charles. 2012. *Social things* (5th Ed.). New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

⁷ Fraser, Nancy. 1997. *Justice interruptus*. New York, NY: Routledge.

⁸ <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1967/02/23/a-special-supplement-the-responsibility-of-intelle/>