

## Engaging Student Disengagement

Mordechai Gordon  
*Quinnipiac University*

In her essay, “Engaging Student Disengagement: Resistance or Disagreement?” Barbara Applebaum raises some very interesting and important questions. For instance, she asks: Should student disengagement in courses that focus on social justice issues be interpreted as resistance or disagreement? Why is it so common to hear social justice educators inform their students that they are concerned with their students’ engagement with the issues rather than their agreement? What do social justice educators mean when they say this? Why is resistance to learning so rampant in such courses? And what types of student engagement and disengagement do social justice educators encounter?

Getting students to engage in the pedagogical process is essential, particularly in courses that deal with social justice and controversial issues, since such courses typically ask students to critically examine themselves, their taken-for-granted cultural beliefs, and how those beliefs may serve to perpetuate institutional forms of discrimination and injustice. As Applebaum correctly recognizes:

For social justice educators, the challenge is how to get *all* students to engage in a context in which a concern for the pedagogical comfort and safety of systemically privileged students often comes at the expense of the comfort and safety of those systemically marginalized. If the aim of social justice pedagogy is to encourage students to examine and bring to awareness the power dynamics supporting systems of oppression and privilege, then social justice pedagogy itself must strive not to reproduce such systems of oppression and privilege in the classroom.

Applebaum is also correct in her assertion that what is generally evident when students refuse to engage in courses that deal with social justice issues is not merely disagreement with the content of the course. Rather, what is at stake in such cases is students’ resistance to the idea of having to look at themselves critically and examine the ways in which their membership in various privileged groups benefits them while simultaneously hurting others. By engagement, Applebaum does not mean simply the recognition of various forms of discrimination and injustice that exist in a given society. Instead, she uses engagement in the sense of “bearing witness” to the horrors of oppression (an interesting notion, though not fully developed). For Applebaum, resistance “is an exhibition of a culturally sponsored defensiveness and refusal to engage that is not only offensive to the systemically marginalized but that also reproduces systems of oppression and privilege in the classroom.” Unlike disagreement with the content of the course, which implies an open-mindedness and a willingness to listen, resistance involves premature disagreement and refusal to engage.

Clearly, then, many students who take courses that focus on diversity and social justice issues resist becoming engaged in these courses. This fact poses a serious challenge for educators who teach these courses: *how to get their students to become more engaged*. And here is where I part ways with Applebaum. Applebaum defends

Lynn Weber's guidelines as a basis for fostering honest and open "engagement with the course material and with the experiences of marginalized others." She also notes that the guidelines "convey a strong message to those who might resist knowing and learning. Resistance will not be allowed to derail the class discussions!" Among Weber's guidelines, I find the ones invoked by Applebaum particularly troubling:

1. to acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist.
2. to agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls that prohibit group cooperation and group gain.

The problem I have with these guidelines is not that they betray a "liberal bias" as some of Weber's critics have charged. Nor am I really concerned with the charge leveled by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education that they represent an attempt to control students' freedom of thought, conscience, and speech.<sup>1</sup> What troubles me about Weber's guidelines as well as Applebaum's defense of them is that they point to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of education. In education in general, and moral education in particular, imposition rarely works. Hence, when Applebaum states that "[student] resistance will not be allowed to derail the class discussions," I wonder how she intends to enforce this rule.

Consider how Martin Buber describes some of the difficulties teachers are likely to encounter when they seek to educate their students' character:

I try to explain to my pupils that envy is despicable, and at once I feel the secret resistance of those who are poorer than their comrades. I try to explain that it is wicked to bully the weak, and at once I see a suppressed smile on the lips of the strong. I try to explain that lying destroys life, and something frightful happens: the worst habitual liar of the class produces a brilliant essay on the destructive power of lying. I have made the fatal mistake of *giving instruction* in ethics, and what I said is accepted as current coin of knowledge; nothing of it is transformed into character-building substance.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, as Buber recognizes, one cannot teach ethics in the same way one teaches other subjects because students are not likely to fully comprehend and internalize the new information if we simply introduce and explain it to them. Similarly, to *demand* of students "an engagement with the course material and with the experiences of marginalized others," as Applebaum advocates, disregards the likelihood that many of them will simply pretend to engage in order to please the professor or not offend anyone, yet not really change their underlying attitudes or beliefs.

Moreover, as Buber reminds us, resistance to the education of character is a fairly common occurrence. He maintains that "as soon as my pupils notice that I want to educate their characters I am resisted precisely by those who show most signs of genuine independent character."<sup>3</sup> If this is indeed the case, then conveying to students the message that resistance will not be tolerated might very well backfire. More importantly, it is not likely to help *all* students become more engaged in the sense of bearing witness that Applebaum favors. Following Buber, I would argue that there are much better ways of getting students to critically examine their taken-for-granted cultural beliefs and to engage with the course material and with the experiences of marginalized others. For example, we can model for students the kind of behaviors and attitudes that Weber's guidelines require and be completely present

and attentive when we teach, especially during controversial classroom discussions. Such methods are likely to be much more effective in helping students become more engaged. As Buber insists:

For educating characters you do not need a moral genius, but you do need a man who is wholly alive and able to communicate himself directly to his fellow beings. His aliveness streams out to them and affects them most strongly and purely when he has no thought of affecting them.<sup>4</sup>

Even if most students in our social justice courses were to comprehend and accept Weber's conditions, we should still keep in mind that there is always a gap between what teachers teach and what students actually learn. This means that the information, directions, and messages that teachers communicate are never understood by all students in the exact way that teachers intend them to be heard. Even if a teacher conveys the ideas to be learned in the clearest possible way, there is always a certain measure of confusion, doubt, and even resistance in the classroom. This is due to the fact that every student is a unique individual and, therefore, each interprets and makes sense of the information in a slightly different way. Therefore, even in the best-case scenario, as Applebaum recognizes, Weber's discussion guidelines are not a panacea that can overcome every form of resistance.

Unlike Applebaum who considers Weber's guidelines as "necessary conditions for full and open dialogue across difference," I believe that many of these guidelines ought to be viewed as the *goals* of courses that deal with diversity and social justice. That is, the guidelines should not serve as basic preconditions for students who wish to take part in these courses, but rather as the outcomes that educators help students attain. To me, "to agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls that prohibit group cooperation and group gain" (guideline 7) sounds very much like the way in which Sonia Nieto and other theorists have defined the goals of multicultural education. Nieto writes that

multicultural education is a transformative process that goes far beyond cultural and linguistic maintenance. In the final analysis, multicultural education needs to confront issues of power and privilege in society. *This means challenging racism and other biases and well as the structures, policies, and practices of schools.*<sup>5</sup>

Following Nieto, we should remember that multicultural education is a slow, transformative process by which we attempt to bring about comprehensive social change. However, the outcomes of this process can never be, nor should they be, fully determined in advance.

---

1. Unlike the concerns of FIRE, my quarrel with Weber's guidelines is not with the *content* of the guidelines but with the *process* by which students are required to embrace them.

2. Martin Buber, "The Education of Character," in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 105.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. See Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, 3d ed. (New York: Longman, 2000), 4 (emphasis added).