

Employing Emotion to Improve Thinking and Alleviate Inequality

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During a sociology class on poverty, the professor shared statistics about racial differences in family income. A white, male student clearly and confidently declared to the class: "I don't think black people should have kids and they should stop relying on the government for aid." The professor let this comment stand and all eyes turned to Kenlyne, the lone black student in the class and the child of a single mother who relied on aid. Kenlyne, eyes starting to water from her feelings of hurt and sadness, could not find an appropriate voice to express herself in the class and remained silent. I witnessed a similar event in my own classroom; a well-dressed, white man calmly proclaimed, "Poor black women should be sterilized." In a demeanor that I have never since repeated in my teaching, I angrily unleashed my sharp tongue, shutting down that man's comment. I was conscious at the time that my uncivil and emotion-laden behavior might prevent this student and others with similar views from speaking up again in the classroom, and I was also conscious that I was trying to support those implicated in such claims. I could say that I used my anger to indicate to the student just how wrongheaded his views were. While this might provoke some students to rethink their views, in his case, I believe it simply affirmed his prior belief that I was a biased and angry feminist whose claims were not to be treated as worthy of genuine reflection.

While I recognize that these situations differ from that of "well-intended" Claire, reading Sally Sayles-Hannon's essay, I was led to rethink these events. Does Sayles-Hannon's call to social thought entail an imperative for Kenlyne to challenge the confident man by sharing her personal story or her hurt? If the professor encouraged the man to delve into the feelings of anger and resentment that might have motivated his declaration, might those feelings have only further sedimented without challenge from Kenlyne? Should my male student's line of reasoning be legitimate fodder for class consideration because it offered a way of seeing the world? Can my demonstration of anger, accompanied by a reasoned rebuttal, somehow model for students how to respond to such racist statements? It seems that in both cases the men believed themselves to be acting in civil ways; they did not express anger or nastiness, rather they shared what they saw as informed and reasoned beliefs in clear and confident ways. They were not civil in the sense of being respectful or considerate, but they were not overtly expressing uncivil emotions like hatred or contempt. As I have witnessed with these men and other dominant social players, classroom civility often doesn't hold the same expectations for everyone. Dominant figures like these can get away with actions and comments that, when performed by women or people of color, would cast the actor in a negative light, perhaps even to such an extent that others would refuse to recognize her contribution or would write off her input as biased or hysterical. It sometimes seems

that civility is an expectation powerful people require of others in order to recognize marginalized people: “check your inappropriate emotions at the door, speak articulately and calmly, and I will listen to what you have to say.” Sayles-Hannon rightly urges us to ask of those demanders of civility: What emotions did you sneak in before the others were invited into the room and how is your understanding harmed by hiding them under your cloak of civility?

I largely support Sayles-Hannon’s proposal and offer here a few points of clarification and caution. I admire Sayles-Hannon’s effort to move past diversity work as feel-good work, especially for white students. Instead, she seems to be calling for feeling work — an emotive response to conditions of injustice and reasoning about them that often doesn’t feel good at all. Sayles-Hannon doesn’t want Whites to just pat themselves on the back for showing a surface level commitment to what they presume to be nonracist views, but to push them to do the harder work of unearthing some of the emotions they may harbor below the surface so that their reasoning will be better informed and, I hope, more likely to lead to action that breaks down systems of inequity. Within this feeling work, I like how Sayles-Hannon moves from the typical understanding of emotions as arising within individuals to employing emotion within communal thinking. I do worry here, however, that such use of emotion, especially when magnified and justified in classrooms by other dominant voices with similar outlooks, may perpetuate anger or resentment in ways that close down learning; one can imagine Kenlyne’s classroom filled with 20 of these voices instead of just one. This is a risk of employing Sayles-Hannon’s approach to teaching social justice, but is one that is reduced by a skilled facilitator.

A teacher, as a facilitator operating in the disrupted space between uncivil behavior and emotion that Sayles-Hannon champions, must figure out how to make emotional sharing not merely therapeutic or cathartic, but also educative and ultimately aimed at alleviating inequity. Emphasizing emotion risks some of the same problems as focusing on the personal knowledge and experiences that Cris Mayo finds to be an inadequate substitute for political change. Perhaps the teacher must become the agent provocateur that Audrey Thompson describes, where she “*facilitates* trouble, removing the civil barriers that protect the privileged from having to think about racism, homophobia, heterosexism, sexism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and class bias ... she insists on showing people what they are refusing to see.”¹

Students who react with anger in the classroom may also shut down reasoning and preclude critical thought. Introducing uncivil emotions doesn’t necessarily lead to clearer reasoning. This may be the point at which the teacher, as facilitator of the critical thinking process, must step in. Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk explain:

Critical Thinking needs to be questioned from the standpoint of social accountability; it needs to be asked what difference it makes to people’s real lives ... and it needs to be interrogated about the social and institutional features that promote or inhibit the “critical spirit,” for if such dispositions are central to Critical Thinking, then the conditions that suppress them cannot be altered or influenced by the teaching of epistemological rigor alone.²

Sayles-Hannon's questioning touches only very briefly on the first and more so on the second. But the later point suggests that Sayles-Hannon might better emphasize emotions blocked by norms of civility as a condition that suppresses the disposition of critical spirit, as opposed to her emphasis on emotions leading to more true results of critical thinking. This spirit may be at risk and without it the continued successful practice of critical thought is unlikely. For Harvey Siegel, reasoning leads to warranted action. Claire's actions do follow from a logical system of beliefs about racist individuals, but she operates on faulty knowledge because she doesn't have a complete picture of the experiences of people of color who experience racism while not at the hands of one prejudiced person. To achieve better knowledge, she must learn to be critical of the beliefs she holds and their sources and must be open-minded to alternative accounts. So what may need to be improved here is Claire's critical spirit.

I close by looking more closely at the emotions Sayles-Hannon believes should be included to enhance critical thinking. Echoing Allison Jaggar, I wonder which emotions we can trust to help us perceive the world in better ways? Sayles-Hannon suggests that we turn to outlaw emotions, but even these can be falsely tainted by internalized oppression or can be misleading; "they may be dishonest or self-deceptive, they may incorporate inaccurate or partial perceptions, or they may be constituted by oppressive values."³ So Sayles-Hannon's call to attend to emotions is a good first step, but how do we know which ones to trust, especially when couched in discussions of racism that carry a long history of deception and mal intent? Questioning the trustworthiness of emotions must be instilled as part of the process of critical thinking itself. And, even when sophisticated reasoning exposes one's emotion as problematic, it can be quite difficult to overcome, because our emotions can become habitually sedimented. So, while Jaggar calls for emotions to be subjected to "critical scrutiny," Sayles-Hannon seems to celebrate them without such a caveat, locating them instead as aids to critical thinking, rather than first as subjects of it. Jaggar primarily uses emotions to reconstruct knowledge and selves, but does not go so far as to describe using them to reconstruct systems of inequality — though she admits that they are a first step in political practice. It is this connection between the intellectual work of emotions and the actual breaking down of structures of inequality that I hope Sayles-Hannon will continue to flesh out and others will consider in this ongoing conversation.

1. Audrey Thompson, "Agent Provocateuse," in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 89.

2. Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk, "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy," in *Critical Theories in Education*, eds. Thomas Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999).

3. Allison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge," in *Feminist Social Thought*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (New York: Routledge, 1997), 399.