

Teaching Ignorance: On Disarming Defenses Against Difficult Knowledge

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Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly—not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge.

— Charles Mills¹

In this article, I want to heed Applebaum's call to "shift the focus away from asking whether someone is being civil or uncivil" and ask: "What are we unwilling to know?" Such a shift, she argues, could have enormous educational implications, and, quite frankly, I couldn't agree more. "Moving away from a concern with civility or incivility and toward practices that challenge systemic and willful ignorance," is a promising approach to transformative social justice education. But just what is systemic ignorance, how does it work, and how is (and isn't) it implicated in willful ignorance (and vice versa)? In this short space, I argue that we are all steeped in ignorance together, albeit in different ways to different degrees, and I advocate for teaching ignorance as a fruitful strategy with which to disarm the defenses that thwart our ability to deal with difficult knowledge.

When we invite students to reflect on particularly touchy and taboo topics such as racial injustice, state violence, systemic and willful ignorance, we should expect defense and resistance. In showing us how we need to "consider subversive incivility, discomfort, and willful ignorance jointly," Applebaum invites us to consider the possibilities of a pedagogy of discomfort that can disrupt

hegemonic, familiar, and comfortable forms of (un)knowing. In reflecting on the ethics of such practice, she asks, “How much discomfort is too much?” “How much discomfort results in change, and, can too much discomfort backfire in ways that reinforce ignorance rather than disrupt it?” I appreciate these questions immensely as I have struggled with them myself on more than one (mis)educational encounter. Psychoanalyst Leo Rangell’s insight on how defense can turn into aggressive resistance against new insight might be instructive here. He writes:

One person suggesting to another what he is doing or feeling and why, or that he is defending against some unwelcome impulse or wish, [or implication in knowledge] arouses not only a defense, but a resistance. Such a reaction was institutionalized and made public in the film, *Never on Sunday*, when a man in a bar told another he loved his mother. The violent response that ensued was such that the physical well-being of the interpreter was in dire danger. The entire audience understood.²

With insight relevant to social justice educators he continues:

Confrontations between individuals about long pent-up and mutual grievances invariably consist of interpretations fired reciprocally from one to the other, usually simultaneously or in quick succession. Delivered with passion and subjectivity on each side.... Resistance is thickened, defenses strengthened, not weakened, and aggression enlisted to further their hold.³

Calling people out on complicity in injustice is tricky business, especially if we hope to inspire personal and social transformation. Teaching about varieties of ignorance, making the human capacity to deploy defenses against discomfort part of the conversation from the outset, I suggest, can help to prevent them from becoming aggressively strengthened. In my experience, students enthusiastically engage in dialogue about mobilizations of ignorance in their own lives and their own education, about how no one seems to know precisely

how “surveillance capitalism,” digital divides, and the spread of mis-and-disinformation works; they eagerly share stories about how and why educational theory, practice, and policy have legislated ignorance about sex and sexuality, what counts as knowledge, who can be said to be in the know, and who and what is known; they are interested in exploration and discussion of how ignorance(s) can be intentionally and inconspicuously mobilized by corporate and other elite powers to dupe us into investing in products, ideas, behaviors and political campaigns that work against our interests and bolster theirs.⁴ Further, turning the lens on to subjective mobilizations of ignorance, we can invite reflection about the defenses that are invoked in the confrontation with difficult knowledge, whether it be a dubious diagnosis, the infidelity of a lover, or one’s misrecognized complicity in structural and other forms of state (sanctioned) violence. We can talk about the different ethical, political, and epistemological ramifications of different investments in varieties of ignorance. What becomes clear is that we are *all* steeped in ignorance, and it’s only bliss until it isn’t.

In order to highlight the dynamics of ignorance, how it moves between structures and subjects (structuring both), how it has been wielded by the powerful against the powerless, but also how it has been used as a strategy of resistance to oppression, an excerpt from the narrative life of Frederick Douglass serves as a powerful entry point into analyzing its operations. In times when Ignorance Laws throughout the Southern states dictated very clearly the horrific punishments for slaves who attempted literacy and the consequences for those who attempted to teach them (a most powerful example of structural, legislated—socially sanctioned ignorance), Frederick Douglass tells the story of how he learned to read and write. He tells the story of how his mistress, who had rather naturally and unthinkingly begun to teach him the alphabet, was admonished by her husband to stop at once, for to teach a slave to read is to render him not just useless but treacherous. And this was the beginning of her downward spiral, he notes, for, at first, she:

lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her

equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute. ... In entering upon the duties of a slave holder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me.⁵

What does Douglass mean by this and why is it important to ask? Revealing the foundation upon which white ignorance has been built, and the dehumanization that disfigures both the oppressor and oppressed, Douglass complicates common sense perceptions of who benefits from systems of injustice and recovers the mutual interest all have in working together to subvert it.

As his mistress learned how to become crueler and ever more preoccupied with preventing his literary aspirations, Douglass was compelled to resort to various strategies to accomplish his mission. Subverting the common sense logic of who holds knowledge and who is ignorant, he was able to trick unsuspecting white boys into giving him lessons in reading and writing. A touching moment in his narrative reveals the tenderness he felt towards these youth, with whom he was able to forge a “flexible solidarity.”⁶ His plan involved making a friend of all the little white boys he met on the street. As many of these as I could, he writes, “I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid,” he continues:

obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent on errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow on the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.⁷

Douglass complicates once again the clear divide between privileged

and oppressed as he reveals the humanity of all, as well as the various activities and investments in ignorance(s). Through his careful and strategic deployment of ignorance, he procured knowledge in a society where ignorance was itself law. Highlighting the strategic activity of ignorance even further, he reflects on the consequences of confronting knowledge in a world that deemed him unworthy, less than human that cruelly strove to keep him in chains and in ignorance, “In moments of agony,” he writes, “I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity.”⁸ Here, Douglass reminds us that “the quest for new insight is always paralleled by the bliss of ignorance.”⁹ After reading his narrative, one of my students wrote, “Douglass learned how to read and write and as he did so he learned more about the world than sometimes he wanted to know. I relate to this because sometimes I find myself becoming ignorant to the news around me because most of the time it is sad or disturbing.” This signals for me a softening of her defense against that which she would rather not know.

In Douglass’ robust depiction of how both systemic and willful ignorance are forces to be reckoned with—no matter which side of the so-called privileged/oppressed divide we find ourselves on, we have an entry point into openly and collectively, less defensively, examining investments in ignorance. We see that ignorance isn’t all bad and that it is ineradicable. The point is not to pretend like we can cure it with proper knowledge but to learn how to live better with it and others. So, let’s begin.

1 Charles Mills, “White Ignorance” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Turana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 13–38.

2 Leo Rangell, “Defense and Resistance in Psychoanalysis and Life,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 31 (1983), 157.

3 Ibid., 158.

4 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019).

5 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 32, https://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Douglass/Narrative/Douglass_Narrative.pdf.

6 See Patricia Hill Collins, “On Violence, Intersectionality, and Transversal Politics,”

Ethnic and Racial Studies 40, no. 9 (2017): 1460-1473, for her important work on this concept.

7 Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 33.

8 Ibid.

9 Rangell, "Defense and Resistance," 156.