

“Solve Your Problem:” Empowering Educators to Push Through Top-Down Mandates this School Year

by Jennifer J. Whitley, The University of Georgia

“Solve your problem. Solve *your* problem.”

While simple, “Solve your problem,” was exactly what I needed to hear. It was not meant as a dividing insult, but instead, as an encouragement to empower myself as a teacher in order to tackle the problems I have in my classroom (and, let’s be honest – outside it, too). A short, direct statement, “Solve your problem” speaks to all social justice educators. This advice, offered to me by my colleague, [Stephanie P. Jones](#), is what I offer to other educators today. There is *plenty* wrong with the current educational model. There is *plenty* to complain about. There is *plenty* holding teachers back, but what we can do is try our best to *solve our problem*, and become the social justice educators our students need.

It is easy to become discouraged when looking at the current state of education. Teacher autonomy is being rapidly replaced with an ever-growing list of non-negotiable practices outlined in standards-based platforms like the [Common Core State Standards](#) and the [International Baccalaureate program](#). Further, teachers must adhere to individualized education programs (IEPs), 504 plans, one-to-one technology mandates, end-of-year standardized test preparations, data-driven curriculum, [Race to the Top](#) initiatives, district-level directives – [*this list could go on*](#).

Moreover, many teachers feel like [the current \[politicized\] educational model](#), which [argues that it is working for](#) our children, is actually doing the opposite: [hurting them](#). The problem is: standardized education [lives within a paradox](#). By averaging the diverse abilities of our *human* students, we create an [inhuman statistical norm](#) for them to follow. One cannot standardize humanity – and isn’t part of our humanity the right and ability to learn? So much effort has been put into changing the dynamics of a classroom in order to meet the needs of our learners, when, in reality, educators know what works because they’ve put the hours into understanding their students’ individual needs. These teachers are flexible

– they modify lessons for diverse learners, re-teach and retest students to ensure enduring understandings, and constantly use inquiry to drive instruction. When something doesn't work, these teachers find another strategy that does.

As a student, I was drawn to [Walt Whitman's \(1865\), *When I heard the learn'd astronomer*](#):

WHEN I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts, the diagrams, to add, divide,
and measure them,
When I sitting heard the learned astronomer where he lectured
with much applause in the lecture room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Even in high school, I rejected the idea that [everyone had to learn the same](#), embracing Whitman's suggestion that education involves discovery. Therefore, as a high school teacher, I tried my best to build my classroom dialogically (Bakhtin, 1981; Beach, Campano, Edmiston, & Borgmann, 2010; Fecho, 2011a; Fecho, 2011b). A dialogical classroom space [arguably] includes an [inquiry-based curriculum](#). Instead of [telling my students about](#) the texts we read, I tried to create an environment where they grappled with ideas, affording them the power to ask questions *and* answer them. I acted as both facilitator and co-learner; however, some topics took more facilitation than others, as I was working with young learners, but I knew my classes well enough to know when they needed more or less of me.

After all, we each bring a specific context to every learning situation (Rosenblatt, 2001; Jones, 2013). Because our contexts differ, so do our learning strategies, abilities, understandings, definitions – you name it. In order to do right by our students, or, in other words: in order to teach for social justice, we need to identify those differences, not ignore them. Freire (2000) argues,

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the

means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 34)

By addressing our students' individual needs, and acknowledging their unique contexts, we invite them into our classroom spaces dialogically, giving them the freedom to read and respond to their world.

However, these spaces are hard to build in a classroom [filled with top-down mandates](#) – and here is where “Solve your problem” becomes essential. We can complain about what we have to do, or quit teaching altogether ([and then write letters about it](#)), or we can do something about the issues we have with educational policy. Theory isn't much without praxis. The things we begrudge about teaching oftentimes are minute, and issues we can rework to fit the curriculum we *want* to teach. For instance, most standards are vague and do not force us to use canonical texts in order to teach a group of diverse learners. Those same standards do not refuse us the right to [integrate pop culture into our classes](#). Additionally, while those standards favor the dominant language, they do not decree that we have to become [this serious](#) about grammar.

Don't get me wrong: I plan to use Yankovic's (2014) *Word Crimes* in my writing methods course this fall, but with an asterisk. Students need to know the rules of our dominant language [Standard English] in order to perform in society; however, it is also important for them to make it their own. We have the ability (and the obligation) to break down the natural power structures of a classroom by allowing students' voices to dominate the conversations happening there. While it is easy to believe that one person cannot change the world, educators are in charge of the world students experience in their classrooms [at least, *partially* – hopefully we share that power with our students]. To me, this power provides us a space to teach social justice; to me, this power is an opportunity to make the change we want to see.

In order to take control of these problems, though, we have to initiate the change. As critical educators, we have the ability to define our own job descriptions. Meaning: we are able to take the standards (and other obligations) dealt to us and modify it all to fit the needs of our classes. We have the ability to [carefully select texts](#) for our students (or, allow them to select the books they read). We are able to align assignments to [pop culture mashups](#) or remix popular ideas into creative lessons that trouble issues of

race, class, gender, and sexuality, just as [this](#) video challenges normative gender roles portrayed in popular movies (mainly: Twilight).

As classes start back this month for most of us, I encourage every teacher, student, and student teacher to “solve your problem,” because goodness knows we’ll encounter many of them. When students say, “This is boring,” ask them what they’d rather learn about, instead of saying, “I know, but I have to teach this.” When you feel yourself getting antsy, try a game of [philosophical chairs](#). Most likely – if you are restless, the students are, too. Let your students [interact with texts](#) instead of merely reading them. All of these ideas are things we know, but some of us have been so overwhelmed, that we forgot we were “allowed” to use them. We can make a difference despite the impossible tasks in front of us. We do not have to be martyrs, we just have to do our jobs, and we are the only ones who can really define them.

References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Michael Holquist (Ed.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Beach, R., Campano, G., Edmiston, B., & Borgmann, M. (2010). *Literacy tools in the classroom: Teaching through critical inquiry, grades 5-12*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Fecho, B. (2011a). *Teaching for the students: Habits of heart, mind, and practice in the engaged classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Fecho, B. (2011b). *Writing in the dialogical classroom: Students and teachers responding to the texts of their lives*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Jones, S. (2008). Grass houses: Representations and reinventions of social class through children's literature. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education [Online]*, 4(2), 40-58.
- Rosenblatt, L. (2001). The literary transaction: Evocation and response. *Theory Into Practice*, 21(4), p. 268-277.
- Whitman, W. (1865). *When I heard the learn'd astronomer*. Retrieved from <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/109/selected-american-and-british-poems/5416/when-i-heard-the-learn-d-astronomer/>
- Yankovic, W. A. (2014, July 15). *Word crimes* (Video). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GvOH-vPoDc>

Jennifer J. Whitley is a doctoral student in the Language and Literacy Education department, as well as the teacher of record for LLED 4450, Teaching Writing in Secondary Schools, at the University of Georgia. Her research interests include critical pedagogy, dialogism, social justice education, YA literature, and poetry. She also runs the blog, Teaching Social Justice (www.teachingsocialjustice.com). She can be reached at jwhitley@uga.edu or on Twitter: @socialjusticeED.