Name a minoritized group that you are a member of. What is the dominant group in relation to your group? What kind of feelings do you experience as a member of this group? In what ways is your group made visible or invisible? In what circumstances? How has oppression manifested in your life as a member of this group? In what ways does this group membership affect your daily lifestyle? How does membership in this group affect your understanding of and attitudes toward the dominant group?

Name a dominant group that you are a member of. What groups are minoritized in relation to yours? What feelings do you experience as a member of this dominant group? Do you notice a difference in your ability to identify feelings when thinking about dominant group membership compared with minoritized group membership? In other words, is this question harder to answer than the questions relating to your minoritized group identity? If so, what are the implications of that difficulty? How is your group powerful? What forms of power does your group hold? Who are some agents of this power? What institutions are used to exert this power? In what ways? What privileges do you have as a member of the dominant group? How does membership in this group affect your daily lifestyle? How does membership in this group affect your understanding of and attitudes toward the minoritized group? (This is a widely used activity called Multicultural Mapping. This version is adapted from Dr. Biren (Ratnesh) Nagda at the School of Social Work, University of Washington, http://depts.washington.edu/ssweb/idea/)


Choose one of the films featured in The Slanted Screen and write an analysis of the film and Chin's work. What does Chin show us about the social construction of knowledge in film?

How to Engage Constructively in Courses That Take a Critical Social Justice Approach

Courses that address social justice and inequality through a critical lens often bring to the surface patterns and tensions that other courses do not. We believe that this is due, primarily, to the intersection of two challenges in academia.

The first challenge is that many students are underprepared to engage in the course content in scholarly ways. Basic study habits, reading comprehension, writing skills, vocabulary, and critical thinking are often underdeveloped in college and university students. This is an issue for all professors. But this challenge is heightened when the topic is politically and emotionally charged. This leads us to the second challenge: Most people have very strong personal opinions about the issues examined in these courses, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. While these opinions are deeply held, they also tend to be predictable ("I don't see color," "I accept people for who they are" or "I'm fine with gays as long as they don't flaunt it"). These opinions are predictable because they are the product of our collective socialization, which makes it possible to form strongly held opinions without being particularly informed on the issues. Indeed, where we are in dominant groups, we will almost certainly have a superficial understanding because that is the primary understanding made available to us. Where we are in minoritized groups, we may relate to the issues but may not have the language to discuss them. Without practice and study beyond what we absorb from daily living, dominant society does not prepare us to think critically about or develop the language and skills to discuss these issues.

Thus effective critical social justice pedagogy will challenge mainstream opinions and in so doing, challenge our very identities. In other words, an effective course will challenge popular ideas about society, how it works, and our place in it. The material will unsettle dominant ideology such as the idea that if we don't believe in things like racism, then we don't participate in them. Unfortunately, most students who are new to the exploration only know one way to understand this challenge: "If you are saying that I participate in systems of injustice such as
racism, you must be saying that I am a bad person.” Later, students should come
to understand that this is not what we are saying, and that binary (good/bad) ways of
conceptualizing these issues are part of what prevents us from seeing them.

In sum, the combination of academically difficult theoretical concepts and
highly emotionally charged political content make these courses very challenging
to many students. Yet relying solely on our opinions, self-concepts, gut feelings, intuitions, beliefs about how society should be, and personal stories is insufficient for understanding and responding to these complex issues. Therefore, to maximize student learning, we offer the following guidelines.

Principles for Constructive Engagement

1. You don't know what you don't know: Strive for intellectual humility.
2. Everyone has an opinion. Opinions are not the same as informed knowledge.
3. Let go of personal anecdotal evidence and look at broader societal patterns.
4. Notice your own defensive reactions, and attempt to use these reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge.
5. Recognize how your social positionality (such as your own race, class, gender, sexuality, ability-status) informs your reactions to your instructor and those whose work you study in the course.

The following vignette illustrates these principles in greater detail.

You are in a course that fulfills a university science requirement. The professor holds a Ph.D. in Astronomy. He has written several books, is widely published in peer-reviewed journals, and has a national reputation in his field. The course objectives include defining terms used in modern astronomy and exposure to the practices, methodology, and concepts of the discipline. The professor is reviewing the assigned readings, which present the most established theories in the field. He overviews the scientific community’s discussion of the number of planets and states that based on the criteria for what constitutes a planet, only 8 planets are officially recognized in our solar system.

One of the students raises his hand and insists that there are actually 9 planets because that is what he learned in school. He has seen many books with pictures of the planets, and there are always 9. He also had a map of the sky in his bedroom as a child and it showed 9 planets. Further, he says, his parents taught him that there were 9 planets and many of his friends also agree that there are 9. The professor tries to explain to the student that to engage with the planet controversy one must first demonstrate understanding of the criteria for what constitutes a planet, but he is cut off by the student, who declares, “Well, that’s your opinion. My opinion is that there are nine.”

The professor tries once more to explain that what he presents in regard to the number of planets is not his own personal opinion, but the scientific community’s established criteria for what defines a planet. Although at one time the scientific community believed that Pluto qualified as a planet, with further study they now understand that it doesn’t, in part due to its shape. These are not opinions, the professor repeats, but theories that have resulted from ongoing research and study. The student replies, “I don’t care if Pluto is square, diamond-shaped, or shaped like a banana, it’s a planet, and there are nine planets.”

Do you imagine that our hypothetical astronomy student would be seen as credible by the rest of the class? Would the class admire him for standing up to the professor and expressing the same opinions they had? Even if his peers did share his opinion, would that make his argument credible? Or is it more likely that he would be seen as having some academic challenges and as somewhat immature and even disrespectful? Would it be assumed that he might have trouble passing the class?

Principle 1: You don't know what you don't know: Strive for intellectual humility. It is unlikely that this student would be taken seriously for two key reasons, one related primarily to academic preparation and the other related to the course content. Regarding academic preparation, students often either don't do the reading at all and rely on the professor to simply tell them what they need to know, or they complete the reading but do not understand what they have read. In our experience, students who have trouble understanding what they read seldom re-read, read more slowly, use a dictionary to look up new words, or ask their professors to explain difficult passages. Standardized testing and the reward system of grades have created a culture of learning that is more about conformity and getting the right answer and less about comprehension or taking intellectual risks. Yet critical social justice education demands a different level of engagement than students may have been prepared for in their previous schooling.

The second challenge we face is that many students see the content in the social sciences as “soft” and therefore subjective. On the other hand, Astronomy is seen as “hard” and therefore objective. Thus students are unlikely to argue with Astronomy findings until they have some mastery in the field. They are more likely to focus on gaining a basic understanding of the various theories and not on whether they agree or disagree with those theories. If they perform poorly on tests, they might feel frustrated with the professor for being “too hard,” but still recognize their own lack of knowledge as the primary cause of the poor grade. Yet in the study of social power, the behavior of our imaginary astronomy student is not uncommon. And, unfortunately, he is often taken seriously by other students—even
seen as a kind of hero for "speaking up to" the professor. Because students often
don't see the study of social power as a form of science, they feel entitled to put it
on a par with their own opinions and dismiss it.

In academia, one's arguments must stand up to scrutiny by peers who are spe-
cialists in the field. This process is called peer review, and it is the cornerstone of
how academic claims are evaluated. The majority of the academic scholarship used
in critical social justice courses has undergone peer review. These works are taken
up by others in the field who refine, add to, challenge, and enhance the arguments.
This scholarship is published only when other scholars who have expertise in the
topic have found the content and claims to be credible and relevant to advancing
knowledge in the field. Students (especially those in introductory critical social
justice courses) are seldom in a position to disagree with the scholars they read.
Although some students may bring important firsthand experiences to the issues
(such as being a member of a particular minoritized group under study), they too
can benefit from grappling with the theoretical framework before debating it.

For the novice reader, grappling with the concepts is the first requirement. To
facilitate doing so, practice the following:

• Read the assigned material closely and carefully. Use a dictionary and
look up new words. Accept that you may need to read all or part of the
material more than once.

• If there are concepts you don't understand, raise them in class. Strive to
make connections to previous ideas and concepts already studied in the
course.

• Focus on understanding rather than agreement. Consider whether "I
disagree" may actually mean "I don't understand," and if so, work on
understanding. Remember, understanding a concept does not require you
to agree with it.

• Practice posing questions. Because most of us have been socialized to
care more about getting the answers right, we may not have developed the
skills required for posing questions. Fearing that asking questions might
reveal that we don't know the answers, we may make bold statements
that lack intellectual humility. These statements could be more usefully
framed as questions. "Grappling with" ideas means to receive, reflect
upon, practice articulating, and seek deeper understanding. Grappling
is not debate or rejection. The goal is to move us beyond the mere sharing
of opinions and toward more informed engagement.

Principle 2: Everyone has an opinion. Opinions are not the same as
informed knowledge. Opinion is the weakest form of academic engagement.
When our comprehension and critical thinking are limited, expressing our
opinion is the easiest response. Opinion doesn't require us to understand the
issues or engage with the course readings. All of us hold opinions before we enter
a course. Expressing these opinions simply rehearse what we already think and
doesn't require us to expand, question, or go beneath our ideas. Students often
share their opinions as a cover for not understanding—expressing our opinions
allows us to fill discussion space without having engaged with the course
material. If we aren't interested in reading what we've been assigned, or don't
understand what we've read, the easiest thing to do is to point to a passage in the
text and give a personal response to it (e.g., "I loved it when the author said that
men dominate because it reminded me of an experience I had..."), or use it to
reject the reading out of hand (e.g., "The author said White people have privi-
gle. I totally disagree with that!"). When students argue from personal opinion
with regard to the concepts studied, for example, claiming, "Racism doesn't exist
anymore," they are in effect expressing an opinion that is not supported by schol-
arily evidence. We would not use opinion in astronomy class and find it highly
unlikely that a student arguing that s/she disagrees with Stephen Hawking on a
matter of astronomy would have her or his position taken seriously, much less
feel free to make such a claim to begin with. Yet in our experience, scholars such
as Peggy McIntosh, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Beverly Tatum are regularly
"disagreed with" well before comprehension of their work is mastered. Most stud-
ents who disagree with these scholars could not adequately articulate the very
ideas they claim to disagree with.

However, curtailing the sharing of opinions in class is often perceived by
students as breaking a social "rule": "I have the right to my opinion and denying
that right is unfair." Of course we have a right to our opinions. But our academic
goals are not to simply share our pre-existing opinions. Our goals are to engage
with scholarly evidence and develop the theoretical tools with which to gain a
more complex understanding of social phenomena. Yet, let us be clear—we do
want students to reflect on and examine their opinions; opening one's opinions
to examination is not the same as simply sharing them.

This preference for opinion over informed engagement often surfaces in
small-group work. For most instructors, the goal of small-group work is for stu-
dents to struggle through difficult ideas with others in order to deepen under-
standing of the concept under study. In addition to the specific prompts and
questions that the instructor has given, all of the following could be taken up in
small-group work:

• Reading through the text together
• Asking clarifying questions of each other
• Making connections to other readings
• Identifying key concepts and defining terms
Generating examples that illustrate the concepts under study
Identifying patterns
Developing questions
Questioning relationships between concepts
Discussing the implications for your own life and work
Identifying and discussing favorite passages
Identifying and discussing challenging passages
Practicing articulating the ideas introduced in the course in order to clarify the ideas and increase your comfort discussing them with others.

From an academic perspective, a small group should never be "done talking" about any topic they are given.

Principle 3: Let go of anecdotal evidence and examine patterns. Anecdotal evidence is evidence drawn from hearsay or limited personal experience. For example, many of us have heard something similar to, "My cousin tried to get a job at the paper mill, but they hired an unqualified Black guy instead because they had to fill a quota." Because mainstream education and media seldom teaches us how social inequality works, most of the evidence we rely on to understand issues of social justice is superficial and anecdotal.

The goals of college and university classes are to expand your ability to make sense of "everyday" events, issues, and incidences; in other words, to offer new and more complex sense-making systems. One of the more important academic skills a student can develop is the ability to apply a new sense-making framework to something they currently make sense of using another framework. For example, imagine that you have pain in your leg and go to your doctor. Your doctor would likely examine your leg, feel the bones and muscles, and perhaps take X-rays to identify the problem. If, however, you went to an alternative (from a Western perspective) medical practitioner (such as a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine), she might have a completely different way of examining your symptom. She may begin by looking at your tongue and examining other parts of your body. A chiropractor might not examine your leg at all, but instead begin work on your spine.

If we are studying how humans understand the body and conceptualize healing, then we are less interested in which practitioner is "right" and which is "wrong" in their approach to your pain. We are more interested in the sense-making framework each practitioner uses, and what that framework offers us in terms of understanding how the body works and how humans conceptualize illness and healing. In the context of critical social justice, we offer a new sense-making framework through which to understand how society works. Consider how our astronomy student's understanding of planets, as well as his understanding of science as an evolving field, could deepen if he was able to engage with current theories about what constitutes a planet. Unfortunately, our hypothetical student's attachment to his previously held beliefs precludes this possibility for growth.

Another popular approach our students take is to focus on one or two exceptions in order to disprove the concept under study. For example, when reading scholarship describing racism as structural, students will often cite sensational examples such as Oprah Winfrey as proof that anyone today can "make it." They may also use personal stories to "prove" that structural oppression doesn't exist (or has now "reversed" direction), such as in the story above about the cousin who didn't get a job and believes this is because the company had to fill a quota. Although it is a common White myth that people of Color must be hired over Whites, it is false and problematic for at least three reasons. First, it's misinformed because hiring quotas are actually illegal. Affirmative Action is a flexible system of goals for the hiring of qualified people who are underrepresented in a given field, not hiring requirements. Second, all of the evidence demonstrates that people of Color are discriminated against in hiring, not preferred. Third, this story rests on a racist assumption that the only reason a person of Color could have been hired over the cousin is because of a quota and not because the person of Color was in fact more qualified; or was equally qualified but brought a needed perspective that the cousin did not.

Focusing on exceptions or unanalyzed personal experiences prevents students from seeing the overall, societal patterns. While there are always exceptions to the rule, exceptions also illustrate the rule. Yes, people from oppressed groups occasionally rise to the top in dominant society. But the historical, measurable, and predictable evidence is that this is an atypical occurrence. If we focus exclusively on those exceptional occurrences, we miss the larger structural patterns. Focusing on the exceptions also precludes a more nuanced analysis of the role these exceptions play in the system overall.

The following questions offer a constructive way to engage with the course content and support Principle 3:

- How can the framework of this course expand my understanding of this phenomena?
- Am I able to identify the larger group patterns at play in any example?
- How might I use anecdotal evidence to increase my understanding of the concepts under study, rather than to dismiss the concepts?

Principle 4: Use your reactions as entry points for gaining deeper self-knowledge. Because our classes directly address emotionally and politically charged issues, they can be upsetting to students. For many, this is the first time they have experienced a sustained examination of inequality. Much of what we teach is counter to everything students have previously been taught. Further, we
ask students to connect personally to the issues we discuss. This combination of the theoretical and the personal challenges our very identities and how we see ourselves in the world.

Although we do not teach that people in dominant groups are "bad," students often hear it that way because their current sense-making framework says that participation in inequality is something that only bad people do. Until students have a critical social justice theoretical framework—which requires a whole new paradigm of sense making—they often find it difficult to remain open. Defensiveness, cognitive dissonance, and even feelings of guilt, shame, and grief are not uncommon. In some ways, these feelings indicate movement and change, and although unpleasant, they are not necessarily problematic. The key to whether these feelings play a constructive or destructive role lies in what we do with them. We can, of course, use them as "proof" that the class content and approach is "wrong" and reject all that we are being taught. But there is no growth for us in this reaction; it only serves to protect and reinforce our current worldview.

Returning to our astronomy student, we can see that upon receiving information that challenged his worldview, he was unable to use his emotional reactions in a constructive way. Instead, he categorically rejected the information, ending with a somewhat nonsensical claim that Pluto was still a planet, even if it was shaped like a banana. This is the equivalent to claiming that we treat the people the same regardless of whether they are "red, yellow, green, purple, polka-dotted, or zebra-striped." (This popular platitude denying the significance of race is problematic for at least two key reasons: First, colorblindness is not actually possible; we do in fact see race and it does have social meaning and consequence; and second, people do not come in these colors and thus this claim trivializes the realities of racism.) When we encounter information that challenges our worldview, emotions can get triggered. A constructive response would be to use these emotions as entry points to deeper self-awareness. The following approach to the course content supports Principle 4:

- How does considering the author's viewpoint challenge or expand the way I see the world?
- How have I been shaped by the issues the author is discussing? For example, if the writer is talking about the experiences of the poor, and I was raised middle class, what does their perspective help me see about what it means to have been raised middle class?
- What about my life in relation to my race/class/gender might make it difficult for me to see or validate this new perspective?
- What do my reactions reveal about what I perceive is at risk were I to accept this information?
- If I were to accept this information as valid, what might be ethically required of me?

Principle 5: Recognize how your social positionality informs your reactions to your instructor and those whose work you study in the course. There are two challenges in the critical social justice classroom related to the concept of positionality (our social group memberships and how these memberships shape our perspectives). The first is the perception that the content of the class is subjective, value-based, and political, while the content of mainstream courses is objective, value-neutral, and unpartisan. This perception emerges in part because instructors of these courses are more likely to name their positionality and encourage students to do the same.

Unfortunately, because acknowledging one's positionality is a rare occurrence in mainstream classes, doing so reinforces students' perceptions of mainstream classes as objective and critical social justice classes as subjective. Of course all knowledge is taught from a particular perspective, but the power of dominant knowledge is that it is presented as neutral and universal. We name our positionality in order to challenge the claim that any knowledge is neutral. Yet many students use that to reinforce the belief that only our courses are not neutral.

The second, interconnected challenge is the dynamic between the instructor and the students. Because faculty who teach critical social justice courses often belong to marginalized groups, and because they name these groups, they are often perceived as having a personal agenda. In other words, they are viewed as if they only teach these courses because they are "minorities." Therefore, students often feel more comfortable to explicitly disagree with the curriculum and pedagogy in these classes. Indeed, this is another layer that makes our example of the astronomy student somewhat unimaginable. The instructor in our scenario is most likely a White male, as is the vast majority of higher education faculty (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009). White males hold more social authority and are seen as more objective. Thus students are less likely to argue with them (Rudman & Kilansky, 2000).

As students move forward in their courses, it is important for them to consider the interplay between their social position and the social position of their instructor. If the instructor represents perspectives from key marginalized groups (women, people of Color, people with disabilities, gay or lesbian people), students could welcome the opportunity to hear perspectives seldom represented in mainstream education. If the course framework is new, students could support the course for the opportunity it offers, rather than undermine it because the concepts are foreign or challenging.

Ultimately, one or two courses in our academic career are not enough to "brainwash" us or deny us the ability to think freely. In fact, the opposite is true: The more depth, perspective, and complexity we can bring to bear on how we view and understand the world, the clearer, more nuanced, and ultimately freer our thinking can become.
The following practices support Principle 5:

- Practice naming your social positionality and reflecting on how it might inform your response to the course context (e.g., White, male, heterosexual, able-bodied). What “blind spots” might you have as a result of your social groups? In other words, what can and can’t you see based on the social positions you hold or don’t hold?
- Practice identifying the perspective inherent in any text (such as books you read for a class, newspaper articles, and magazines). Are the ideas presented using “scientific” discourses of “objectivity”? Are the ideas presented as if they apply universally to all people, regardless of social positionality?

Grading. Grading in courses that examine issues of critical social justice can be challenging for both students and instructors. Grading in a course whose primary goal is to challenge social stratification is not without its irony. Activist and scholar Audre Lorde captures this irony when she states that, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” By this she means that in using the tools of the system we are more likely to uphold that system than to challenge it. As instructors, we recognize that by grading, we are upholding a system that ranks students hierarchically, and such rankings are part of the very systems we seek to challenge. Still, many of us choose to work within the constraints of the system in order to challenge it. The traditional grading system is one of those constraints we must work with.

Mainstream schooling focuses a tremendous emphasis on grades, and the prevalence of high-stakes testing has only intensified this emphasis. Grades convey powerful ideas about a student’s presumed intellectual abilities and these ideas influence what education that student will have access to (through tracking into “gifted” or “special” programs and ability grouping). Students are placed into academic tracks as early as 1st grade and these tracks have very real consequences for the kinds of careers they will have access to later in life (Oakes, 1985). Thus an understandable but regrettable outcome of tracking based on grades in K–12 schooling is that many students come to care more about the grades they receive than about the knowledge they gain.

The focus on grades often shapes students’ very identities and sense of self-worth, further complicating the dynamics of grading. This identity is often reinforced outside of schools as students earn praise or punishment from their families based on their grades. While some students who have not been successful within this system come to feel fortunate just to earn a C, students who have generally been successful by the measure of grades often feel entitled to As. It is not uncommon for these students to let us know, “I am an A student!” Students with such an identity may feel frustrated—even personally slighted—when receiving grades that challenge this identity.

Although we are aware of the complexities and contradictions of grading, we are also deeply invested in student comprehension of the course concepts. The grading system is one of the primary tools we must use to both measure and communicate our assessment of this comprehension. We encourage students to keep the following in mind when considering the dynamics of grading:

In order to grade comprehension, we must see demonstration of comprehension. Whether in assignments or in class participation and discussion, a student must demonstrate understanding. Comprehension can be demonstrated in both written and verbal forms.

Assessing student comprehension verbally is generally done through class discussions and question-and-answer sessions. However, assessing comprehension verbally can be challenging for instructors if students don’t speak up in class. For example, it is not uncommon for us to pose a question to the whole class and be met by silence. Looking out into a room full of students, most of whom are not responding, we are left to assume that these students cannot answer the question. Students sometimes tell us later that they did not respond because the answer was “so obvious” that it did not require a response. Yet how can we know that students understand if they do not respond when questions are posed in class, even if the answers to those questions seem obvious?

Another common explanation for silence is that someone has already said what the student who didn’t speak was thinking. Yet from our perspective, it is fine to repeat (or better yet, to build on) an idea that another student has already stated. No two people will say it exactly alike, and it is important to practice articulating these concepts in your own words in order to develop your critical social justice literacy. Any statement can be expanded, deepened, or in other ways supported. At the minimum, if students repeat what others have said, we can gain a sense of how many students are thinking similarly, or struggling with understanding key ideas. This is valuable information for instructors in terms of assessing the collective understanding of the group as well as the comprehension levels of individual students. For these reasons, we encourage students to give some kind of verbal response when asked questions in class, even if it is to say that one is not sure or only has a partial answer.

In regard to demonstrating understanding in written work, we evaluate this work by assessing how well written, organized, and clear it is, and how well the submitted work meets the goals of the assignment. The work should (at minimum) be proofread for errors, use appropriate academic language, avoid colloquialisms, conform to a standard style of citation, use inclusive language, and stay within the guidelines of the assignment description. These are all baseline indicators of the degree of student achievement in a written assignment. Perceptive integration of course readings and lectures in a student’s own words, relevant use of examples,
and insightful connections can transform an adequately written assignment into an excellent (or "A") assignment. These criteria are usually communicated to students either in the course syllabus or assignment description. Thus in order to most accurately grade comprehension we must see evidence of comprehension in both verbal participation and in written work.

**Effort is not the same as understanding.** When students are worried about their grades or are making a case for the grade they believe they "should" receive, they often claim that they "worked really hard." They feel that they should be rewarded for that hard work with an A. But we are grading student **demonstration of understanding** of content, not the degree of effort expended to achieve it.

Consider this analogy: I am taking swimming lessons. My goal is to compete in an upcoming match. I see myself as putting in a lot of effort by making the time to show up for practice, follow my coach’s instructions, and swim the number of laps I am assigned. My coach, however, expects that I will show up and complete my practice sessions; thus, s/he is focused on how I hold my body while swimming, my breathing pattern, hip and shoulder movements, smoothness of stroke, and speed. In the end, my coach will determine whether I am ready to compete. This determination will be made based on my ability to demonstrate that I am ready, regardless of the degree of effort it takes me to reach that point.

In a similar way, we are grading students on the degree of demonstrated understanding of studied concepts and not on perceptions of effort, especially because what we as instructors see as "effort" and what a student sees as "effort" are often not the same. For some students, showing up to class, listening, and handing in assignments are viewed as evidence of effort. For instructors, this level of effort qualifies as the baseline expectation of any student. Still, we are not grading on how "hard" a student works but on the **outcome** of that work.

The following are common—yet problematic—types of student rationales for why they should get a grade higher than what was earned:

- "I worked really hard."
- "I am an A student."
- "I came to all the classes."
- "I listened."
- "I spent hours doing the readings."
- "I talked in class discussions."
- "I handed in all my assignments."
- "I have never thought about these things before."
- "I’m really interested in these issues."
- "I’ve had other courses like this one so I already know all this."

Student rationales such as these are familiar to many instructors. Yet these rationales are not credible arguments for receiving an A or any other grade higher than what was earned. We understand students’ anxieties about grades; however, we urge our students to challenge this anxiety because it thwarts the process of authentic learning.

A final note on grading: Students often believe that the reason they received a poor grade was because the instructor didn’t like something they said in class. Every institution has an appeal process for students who feel they have not been graded fairly by an instructor. This makes it very difficult to lower a student’s grade just because of something they said. While classroom assessments have some degree of subjectivity, an instructor has to be able to account for a grade they gave in terms that are clear to a mediating third party. Because of this accountability, an instructor’s grading criteria are usually clearly stated in the syllabus or on assignment sheets.

Many college and university courses provide opportunities that are rare in any other dimension of life: critical engagement with new ideas; the opportunity to hear and consider multiple perspectives; the expansion of one’s capacity to understand and talk about complex social issues; guidance in the examination of our identities, socialization, and meaning-making frameworks; and the tools to build a more just society. Unfortunately, the focus on grades undermines these opportunities.

We find that students who let go of their attachment to grades and put their energy into mastery of the content tend to do well. Worrying about grades detracts from the ability to focus on content and can become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The following reflection questions may be useful in lessening this attachment:

- Am I willing to consider that I may not be qualified to assess my performance in a course, especially one in which new concepts are being introduced?
- Do I expect an A in all of my courses, and if so, why? Is it because I have always received As, or is it because I have demonstrated mastery of course concepts?
- When I ask my instructor, “How am I doing?” am I asking him/her to provide me with valuable feedback about what my performance conveys about my comprehension and how it might be improved, or am I asking him/her to tell me what grade I will receive?
We sincerely hope that our students find our courses valuable in terms of the knowledge and insight gained. It has been our experience that this is most likely achieved when students focus more on mastery of content rather than on the final grade.

Discussion Questions and Extension Activities

1. Choose a text you are reading in your course and generate at least five questions that are designed to guide the reader to engage more deeply with the key ideas in the text.

   Use the following guidelines to test the quality of your questions:
   Is the question a "Go look it up" question (e.g., "In what year was the article published?" or "What is the name of the city that the school is in?")? While these questions can be useful and important (i.e., it would be important to recall if the school was in a small town like Vancouver, Washington, or a big city like Vancouver, BC), these are not questions that generate discussion or engagement. Instead, they function primarily as recall questions.
   Is the question designed to generate the sharing of opinions? (e.g., "What is your favorite passage?" or "What did you disagree with?"). Questions or other openings that invite the mere sharing of preferences or agreements should be limited. While sharing how one feels about the text can be interesting, it doesn't generally invite deeper discussion or engagement with complexity.
   Does the question set up an either/or debate? Such questions often begin with "Should" or "Do you agree" (e.g., "Should schools ban soda machines?" or "Do you agree that opportunity is not equal?")
   The limitation of these questions is that the debate format does not leave much room for examining grey areas—the space between an either/or, yes/no frameworks. Debates of this type are also opinion based and require no previous knowledge or integration of the course content.

   Consider the following strategies for developing quality questions:
   Design questions that cannot be easily answered with a yes or no; for example, "Consider Gatto's argument that all teachers teach the 7 lessons. On a continuum from 'Yes absolutely' on one end to 'No absolutely not' on the other, position yourself in relation to his argument. Explain why you have positioned yourself there."
   Offer phrasing such as, "Under what conditions..." and "To what extent..."; for example, "Under what conditions might we avoid teaching Gatto's lessons?" 
   "To what extent does the school curriculum influence teacher autonomy? Use the course readings to support your position."

   Questions connected to texts should require familiarity with the text to answer; for example, "Identify two of Gatto's seven lessons and find examples you have seen in schools." If someone can respond to the question without ever having read the text, it is not a strong question.

   Questions may also ask people to reimagine. For example, "Using the readings, design the ideal classroom. What would be the guidelines for student engagement? How would the curriculum and pedagogical activities be organized? How would you assess your goals?"

General Reflection Questions

1. If I wasn't worried about my grade, how would my engagement in this class shift?
2. Why am I in college or university? What is my role as a student?
3. What degree of responsibility am I willing to take for getting the most out of this course (e.g., coming to class prepared and having completed the reading, engaging in large-group discussions, not dominating discussions, asking questions for clarity, speaking respectfully in class, and using academic rather than colloquial discourse)?
4. What degree of responsibility am I willing to take to support my peers in getting the most from this course (e.g., engaging in discussions, not dominating discussions, listening respectfully when others speak, taking the small-group discussions seriously, coming to class prepared and having completed the reading)?
5. Many students think about higher education solely as a stepping-stone to employment, and thus the only knowledge that is worthwhile is knowledge they see as directly connected to getting a job. We ask you to consider what other kinds of skills higher education can provide, and how these skills are also connected to future employment. If you think beyond a strictly vocational approach, what skills do citizens in a global democracy need? How are these skills also important to any future work you do?