

Spring 2018

# “Get the Mexican”: Attending to the Moral Work of Teaching in Fraught Times

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## Recommended Citation

Grinell Smith and Colette Rabin. “Get the Mexican”: Attending to the Moral Work of Teaching in Fraught Times” *Schools: Studies in Education* (2018): 98-121. doi:10.1086/697096

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# ON THE HORIZON

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## “Get the Mexican”

Attending to the Moral Work of Teaching  
in Fraught Times

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The opposite of morality is not immorality, but indifference.

—Elie Wiesel

We teach in a large, urban university on the central coast of California, in a postbaccalaureate program centered on issues of social justice and equity. The goal of this article is to share a four-faceted approach to structuring discourse that we have found useful when subjects under discussion in our classes become contentious. We developed this approach with democracy in mind. We were interested in an approach that did not require teachers to check their belief systems at the door and that did not ask anyone to subvert their core beliefs or to sacrifice their principles on the altar of comity. We think this approach offers a way for teachers to bring who they are to the job of teaching in constructive ways to help their students, who may disagree, actually hear one another, consider one another’s ideas, and make decisions not as bitterly divided partisans but as members of complex, multifaceted, multicultural communities. This, to us, represents the best of democracy.

We note that our teacher candidates also report that leveraging this same approach with their students has proven useful to guide contentious discussions among children.<sup>1</sup> Thus, we offer it as a practical approach for instructors in teacher preparation programs and for teachers in K-12 settings. The approach is at once formulaic enough to be readily implemented without the

1. To avoid confusion, we refer to our students as “candidates” and the children with whom they work in their field placements as “students.”

need to master complex technicalities and yet robust enough to support authentic and inclusive dialogue across difference in a wide range of contexts. We view it as a way of attending to the moral aspects of teaching, work that is frequently given short shrift in teacher education programs in particular and in schools more generally.

Most of our classes meet in the evenings because our credential candidates spend their days coteaching in their field placements. Many of the events we describe next played out during the second semester of a three-semester program, in a classroom management course taught by Smith. The foundation for the approach we describe—creating a cohesive learning community—was laid in a first-semester sociology of education course taught by Rabin. (The remainder of this section is described from Smith’s perspective, and thus we use first-person writing in which the pronouns “I” and “me” refer to Smith.)

On the evening of November 9, 2016, the day after the presidential election, several candidates met me at the door of a scheduled evening class, clearly agitated and quite upset. Talking over the others and pointing to my laptop as I connected it to the projector, one of the candidates, Kate, said, “I don’t know what else is on the agenda tonight, but we have to talk about what happened at school today. My kids are completely freaked out and I don’t know what to say to them. It went sideways all day. And OK, *I’m* freaked out too.”<sup>2</sup>

By “her kids,” Kate meant the 29 fourth-graders under her care at Rio Verde Elementary, the K–5 school in a nearby agricultural community where she was completing her first semester’s student teaching. And of course it was clear what they wanted to talk about: the election of Donald Trump had sent waves of fear and uncertainty through many of the communities in our service area. More than 85 percent of the children at Rio Verde, for example, identify as Latinx, and like many schools within reach of California’s agricultural industry, the Rio Verde student enrollment numbers move up and down with the harvest as migrant farmworker families on “the circuit” follow work from field to field (see Jiménez 1999). Many members of the Rio Verde community are not officially authorized to work in the United States, and to many of them, the election seemed a harbinger of doom that threatened to upend their lives. Understandably, their children were upset and afraid too.

Of course not everyone in the communities we serve was upset or afraid. While Clinton carried the state handily, Trump still got votes: even in the heavily democratic-leaning San Francisco Bay Area, 2 or 3 of every 10 peo-

2. Pseudonyms are used for people and place names throughout.

ple voted for the victor (Politico 2016). Coincidentally, a number of national exit polls suggest that nationwide, Trump won about this same percentage of the Latinx vote—about 2 or 3 out of 10.<sup>3</sup> Another way to think about these numbers is this: on November 9, if you put 10 “average” Bay Area voters in a room, it is likely that 3 of them would be very happy and 7 of them would be very upset.

This was, in fact, the very situation in which I and my students began the evening, although there were 26 of us in the room, not 10. Most of our candidates, just arriving on campus from their student teaching, seemed to be still reeling from the election results, struggling to make sense of how thoroughly they had misjudged so many of their fellow citizens and worrying about what a Trump administration might mean. One candidate, Stacie, for example, had—unwisely, it turned out—held a straw poll in her sixth-grade class on the morning of November 8, in which Clinton had won un-animously, and she had just spent a painful half hour or so helping her students grapple with just how wildly unpredictable their poll turned out to be. I noticed, however, that a handful of our candidates had not joined the chorus of outrage and bewilderment being expressed in anecdote after anecdote from the day’s events. They were sitting in silence, serene except for the obvious fact that in this particular room, mirroring regional and statewide numbers, they were very much in the minority. I watched them carefully, thinking about a phrase I ran across years ago in David Finkel’s (2010) book *The Good Soldiers* that stuck with me: “the silence of bending glass” (249). They sat in silence. I was on edge. And the anecdotes flowed.

Many of the anecdotes were heartbreaking. Alejandra told of a second-grader who announced through sobs during morning meeting that his mother and father had decided the family would return to Mexico but he didn’t want to go because he would miss his classmates, his neighborhood, the only life he’d ever known. It was a common story—Juliana, Lacey, and Sabrina shared nearly identical ones, and in the telling they expressed their own anger that the children in their care should be made to feel this way. They shared their own anxieties about the future of the communities in which they served, their worries about what the election said about the nation’s commitment to liberty and freedom for all, their own feelings of powerlessness against such an abrupt sea change. Story after story of disbelief,

3. FiveThirtyEight.com reported that Trump won 29 percent of the Latinx vote nationally (Enton 2016). However, several polling companies focusing on the Latinx demographic, such as Latino Decisions, have argued convincingly that Trump won only about 20 percent of the Latinx vote (Sanchez and Barreto 2016).

shock, fear, dismay, with classroom vignettes woven throughout, with a few candidates sitting quietly among the speakers, silenced perhaps by a bewildered and outraged majority. A vignette from Alice, however, seemed to require an immediate teacher intervention, and thus it shifted our attention away from our own feelings and changed the tenor of the room: a game had spontaneously erupted among a group of fifth-graders on the playground at her school, which, not unlike Rio Verde, served a majority Latinx population, many of whom had immigrated from Mexico and were in the United States without documentation. The rules were simple. The kid who is “it” runs around attempting to raid the assortment of valuables they had collectively staged all over the playground—a snack from someone’s lunch beside the water fountain, a tidy pile of erasers on the picnic table—while other kids give chase. The “it” kid is fair game when he’s out in the yard, and if the other kids catch him, he must leave the game; he is safe only when he’s touching the wall of the school. It was a game of tag, essentially, but the kids had renamed the game.

“They were calling it ‘Get the Mexican,’” Alice said. “And the kids who were playing it? They’re all from Mexico. And not an hour before, these same kids were the ones telling me about how worried they were that their families were going to get deported.”

I asked the obvious question. “So, what did you do?”

“I told them to stop calling it that, which seemed really shallow and stupid and completely beside the point as soon as I said it,” Alice said. “I just didn’t know what else to say. I told them to stop and I just kind of walked away, because I felt helpless. It was horrible.”

Her words hung in the air for a long moment as we considered the situation, the metaphors at play painfully obvious. The game itself was not the problem, of course; one could even view it as a cathartic response to trauma. The problem was what the game starkly revealed to Alice, who is white and a US citizen: that a national and very divisive narrative about immigration was playing itself out in her backyard. After a bit, I said:

Let me suggest a way forward for the discussion. Unlike Stacie’s like-minded sixth-graders, this region, this city, and I suspect this *class* did not vote unanimously. If we are willing to accept that as true, and also agree that we in this room probably hold very different opinions about the president-elect that we will not resolve in this forum, perhaps we can table politics, at least for now, and discuss what is much more immediate and certainly more directly related to the content of this course: your teaching. Instead of talking about election results and

what changes are coming, let's talk about what you will do and what you will say in your role as teachers.

Given the rawness of the day, it was clear that this was going to be hard. Nonetheless, everyone agreed to try, and so for the next two and a half hours we tried as best as we could not to focus on our political affiliations and to focus instead on the children under the candidates' care and their responsibilities—both professional and personal—to those children.

### **A Four-Faceted Approach to Foster Constructive Discourse in Fraught Times**

Here, we describe the method Smith used to mediate this difficult discussion by leveraging a four-faceted approach described by Smith (2017), which we developed precisely for the kinds of fraught discourse our class faced: discourse about topics in partisan arenas, many of which intersect with issues of equity and social justice. Partisan discourse—in schools and in society at large—is typically not about adjudicating facts and putting them into various contexts. Instead, such discourse demands an unwavering fealty to a set of ideals such that one's beliefs become shibboleths signifying association. Opinions about a transgender bathroom bill, for example, are seen to travel in lockstep with beliefs about immigration and gun control, even though on the face of it immigration and gun control have nothing to do with bathrooms (Pinker 1999). If facts are not powerful enough to carry the day in partisan discourse, one must ask, How does a person decide what—or who—to believe? As teacher educators, we are chagrined by the seeming inability of large numbers of people to distinguish between well-established facts and obvious misinformation. We reflect on Thomas Jefferson's words in 1821—"no nation is permitted to live in ignorance with impunity"—and we hear a call to action. Jefferson's observation is a recognition that all education has moral and ethical import. It calls attention to the idea that what and how we choose to teach relates directly to the social forces that have the power to either bind us together or drive us apart. In short, no matter what else we teach, we are also teaching our students how to live in the company of others.

### **Key Elements of the Four-Faceted Approach**

Our four-faceted approach to support and structure discourse in fraught times centers on addressing cognitive biases commonly at play in such discourse (for more detail about these biases, see Smith 2017). As we noted ear-

lier, our approach is not directly concerned with conveying “facts,” in part because facts, surprisingly enough, often do not change people’s minds: when the choice is between rejecting ideas that signify our social affiliations or rejecting facts, we often choose to reject facts (Lakoff 2014). Instead, our approach is informed by our response to the question, “What is the psychology that motivates a member of any particular group to reject the views and beliefs of others?” We identify three factors that often influence fraught discourse and thus are relevant to this question. First, we note the increasing influence of well-organized and well-funded misinformation campaigns by various political groups pursuing their own narrow interests (see, e.g., Jowett and O’Donnell 2014). This factor is complicated by a second factor: a widespread failure to deeply appreciate how immoral and inequitable policies and practices of the past (e.g., slavery, suffrage) cast long shadows on the present (Kumashiro 2015). This, in turn, gives rise to a third factor: a tendency among advantaged people to avail themselves of their advantages unreflectively and without malice toward the disadvantaged, which can make it difficult for them to connect their individual behavior to its social consequences (Burr 2015, hooks 2014). Each of the four facets of our approach is designed to take these factors into account.

#### Facet 1: Create Inclusive Learning Communities

Most people are strongly driven to form associations around commonalities central to our self-image—the language(s) we speak, the religion we practice, the clothes we wear, the candidates we support. The trouble with group affiliation, however, is that it can skew perceptions about the behavior and beliefs of others: when in-group members do or say something good, we’re more likely to believe it’s because of their dispositions, and when they do something bad, we’re apt to attribute the behavior to a situation in which they find themselves. Unfortunately, when out-group members do something bad, we attribute it not to their situations but to their dispositions—they’re bad people. Psychologists call this “attribution bias” (Kunda 1990, 480), and it is important because when you perceive someone as a bad person, it is easier to ignore or reject their words and behavior. The goal of the first facet is to pay careful attention to group dynamics and work to reduce the in-group favoritism that often leads to this kind of attribution bias. Next we describe in some detail how we do this in our classes.<sup>4</sup>

4. For more guidance on how this might be done, we also recommend Watson and Ecken’s (2003) excellent book-length case study *Learning to Trust* as a detailed and very ac-

Dealing with group dynamics is central to classroom management. With positive support and developmental guidance, classes cohere into inclusive learning groups (see, e.g., Watson and Ecken 2003), but in the absence of such support and guidance, classes can fracture into dysfunctional cliques and outcasts. Helping students see everyone in the class as part of the same group can make it easier to help them maintain open minds about others' ideas. Ethics philosopher and educator Nel Noddings (2015) offers a theoretical perspective to guide the creation of inclusive and caring classrooms. In her philosophy, to care for someone requires engrossment—developing concern for another that is deep enough to allow a nuanced understanding of that person and their situation. Engrossment can lead to motivational displacement, which prompts action on behalf of the other person in ways that the cared-for person recognizes as caring. The back-and-forth nature of this kind of caring is ready-made for disrupting us-versus-them thinking and fostering inclusive learning communities in which education across difference can succeed.

## Facet 2: Identify Commonly Held Goals

Intergroup conflict often arises because groups stake out oppositional positions that the members of each conflicting group identify as critical to their fundamental beliefs but that on closer inspection are in fact subordinate to those underlying beliefs. Social conflict theorists suggest that helping groups identify superordinate goals—goals everyone agrees with but that are too large for one group to accomplish by itself—can be a powerful antidote to intergroup conflict (Sherif 2015). The idea is straightforward: work with students to identify common values about people and society that intersect with fraught subjects in broad ways but that do not necessarily relate directly. This is easier than one might imagine, even among people who seem to fiercely disagree, because as it turns out that the psychological aversion to op-

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cessible practical example, along with Charney's (2002) book *Teaching Children to Care*. For article-length pieces, we recommend Ullucci's (2009) "This Has to Be Family': Humanizing Classroom Management in Urban Schools," as well as our own "My Lesson Plan Was Perfect Until I Tried to Teach': Care Ethics into Practice in Classroom Management" (Rabin and Smith 2016) and Rabin's (2011) "Learning to Care during Storytime in the Current Context." For a more theoretical approach to caring and inclusive classroom management, we recommend Noddings's (2015) *The Challenge to Care in Schools*. Complete references are provided in the reference list.

posing views often isn't about the "problem" under discussion, it's an aversion to proposed or imagined solutions that some people see as inconsistent with their core values (Campbell and Kay 2014). Drilling down to core beliefs before embarking on discussions can enable students to sidestep psychological barriers before they get in the way of thinking. We suggest framing these common values—what psychologists call a "commitment store"—as a set of class-wide position statements, such as, "We believe everyone, by virtue of their humanity, has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Posted in the room for all to see, these statements can become touchstones to keep students working as a group, even when they disagree, by reminding them of shared goals and values.

### Facet 3: Use Deliberation Instead of Dispute

Deliberation and dispute are two common forms of argumentation, and they are very different from each other. The goal of dispute is to win, whereas the goal of deliberation is to come to a shared agreement. Argumentation researcher Mark Felton and his colleagues (2009) put it like this: in a jury trial, dispute is what opposing lawyers do; deliberation is what the jury does. Psychologists have convincingly demonstrated that deliberation is usually better at helping students consider many sides of a position, whereas dispute can make it more difficult to entertain opposing positions and thereby actually entrench one's views (Felton et al. 2015). Of course, dispute has its place—dispute can often inform deliberation, as it does in trials with juries—but in fraught discourse, it often clouds thinking. The psychological explanation for this involves what is called "loss aversion." Loss aversion, which many psychologists suggest is nearly twice as strong as the desire to win, can make zero-sum disputes (i.e., my win means your loss) psychologically very threatening, and in a quest to avoid losing, people often fall victim to confirmation bias, which is a tendency to pay closer attention to information that supports one's position than information that would undermine it.

The idea behind the third facet is to structure discourse carefully to remove the psychological threat of loss and thus avoid these biases. For example, instead of holding a traditional zero-sum debate over how best to address a social challenge, a teacher might task students with a discourse goal of researching many possible ideas and rank-ordering them along various dimensions (e.g., cost, ethicality, economic feasibility, political palatability). This kind of deliberation specifically tasks people with finding common ground. More important, because it's not a zero-sum debate, no one has to lose.

#### Facet 4: Use Real—or Realistically Imagined—People, Places, and Events in Discussions

In a series of experiments about how people make use of information about the behavior of others, psychologists Richard Nisbett and Eugene Borgida confirmed what many teachers have long noted: people are not good at applying general information to specific circumstances. They also documented the converse: we often overgeneralize from specifics. As they put it, “subjects’ unwillingness to deduce the particular from the general was matched only by their willingness to infer the general from the particular” (Nisbett and Borgida 1975, 939). This insight suggests a teaching strategy we call the “proper noun” approach that is centered on a clarifying goal: helping students think in concrete ways. Implementing it is straightforward: make issues personal. For example, rather than listening to an abstract presentation about the increasing struggles that children of migrant farmworkers face stemming from changing immigration policies, a teacher might ask students to learn about Isabel Rios, an undocumented worker from Mexico whose two US-born children, ages 9 and 18, are facing the prospect of their mother’s deportation and are “just waiting and praying, hoping that somebody can convince [the authorities] that we are not hurting anyone by being here” (Dickerson and Medina 2017). Why? Because for most people, considering the plight of two distraught children worrying about life without their mother is harder to dismiss than an abstract policy position because the children’s plight more clearly intersects with shared values.

#### **The Four Facets in Practice**

It is helpful to think of these four facets as operating in concert with one another, and indeed, usually all four are in play at the same time. That said, one of the facets—creating cohesive and inclusive learning communities—is first among equals. It must, in fact, come first because when the learning community is disjointed or when some members of the learning community are mistrustful of the motives of other members, the other three facets fall flat or, worse, add to the challenges. In our view, the bedrock of an inclusive and trusting learning community is authenticity—the ability of its members to think deeply and to connect in honest ways that reveal who they are and what they actually believe—which in our experience rarely happens automatically in a room full of adults, or children for that matter.

We start on the very first day of the first semester of our three-semester program by beginning to surface what we see as one of the most serious

threats to authenticity in school settings, what Lortie (1975) referred to as the “apprenticeship of observation” (61)—the thousands of hours sitting in desks, eating in lunchrooms, and playing on playgrounds that teach us in deep ways how “school” is done, what “belongs” in schools and what does not. As Lortie noted, the apprenticeship of observation, if left unexamined, can constrain one’s thinking and lead teachers to reproduce the status quo by foreclosing possibilities that lie outside their own personal experiences and can lead people in school settings to interact “schoolishly” rather than authentically (Behizadeh 2014; Whitney 2011). The goal at this stage is straightforward: we aim to help our candidates recognize how our personal biases and preconceptions of schooling, of people, and of society and culture shape our thinking in ways that, in the short run, may serve as barriers to inclusive community building and, in the long run, may constrain us as teachers. But this is easier said than done. Any number of paths through this particular thicket could be taken. We detail ours next, at some length.

### Facet 1: How We Built an Inclusive Learning Community

Learning to address the innumerable ethical dilemmas woven into the very fabric of authentic teaching requires teachers to foster a learning community that can accommodate *liminality*, a space in which students are willing to abandon—if only for a time—what seem to be default convictions of so many of us: that our experiences are representative of other people’s experiences, that we are right in our opinions, and that our role in discussions is merely to convince others of our correct points of view. To help our candidates rethink their biases about school and its place in the world and thereby learn to become teachers who choose not to mindlessly replicate the status quo and instead work to create transformative educative experiences, we needed the authentic presence of each of our candidates in dialogues that we could neither accurately predict nor completely control. We started by structuring explorations of a series of texts with explicit invitations for our candidates to connect the texts to their own experiences and then to explore how those connections were similar to or different from ones their colleagues noted. Although our program is not as diverse as we would like, we were fortunate that in this cohort, as in nearly every cohort of candidates our program serves, several languages, cultures, and socioeconomic groupings were well represented. In our experience, this “reaching out and reaching over” to others led candidates to the discovery that many of the assumptions they held about their classmates were terribly inaccurate. As is often

the case, the result was a deepening of our candidates' awareness and understanding that their own experiences did not universally reflect the experiences of others, an idea that on the surface seems obvious but in practice is notoriously difficult to disabuse oneself of (see, e.g., Delpit 2006). In this way, we began to stitch ourselves together as a group that understood a little more about where the others in the conversation came from and the landscapes they traveled to join us, and thus we became disposed to listen to one another with more care and understanding than we otherwise could.

Simultaneously, over several weeks we collaboratively created classroom norms designed specifically to support this journey of discovery. On day 1 of the first semester, we asked our candidates to share a story associated with their names. (Perhaps surprisingly, over the years we have found that nearly everyone has such a story waiting in the wings, ready to be told!) We then read an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros's (2013) *The House on Mango Street*, in which she wrote eloquently about the origins of her family name and about her grandmother (see chap. 5, "My Name"). Rather than simply jumping into a discussion of the text, we asked our candidates to reflect in a "quick-write" (an informal jotting down of ideas) on the larger purposes that drew them to teaching. They were tasked with scrupulously avoiding the use of clichés in their writing, a qualification that invariably turns out to be harder than it first sounds (we spent a few minutes prior to quick-writing to explicate for ourselves what might qualify as clichés and why). We then asked candidates to think about whether "who they are," as symbolized by their names, was related in any way to the deeper purposes that brought them to teaching. They then shared their reflections with one another, with an eye toward finding commonalities among them.

During the second class meeting, candidates recalled a time when they came away from an experience having learned something, and we dug into these experience to uncover their features, interrogating how educative experiences that they found meaningful, or at least memorable, often differed from quotidian ones. For this, we used John Dewey's (1938/2007) criteria for an educative experience as a framework on which to hang our ideas, characterizing their features in terms of continuity, interaction, and end-in-view: learning happens in the present when one finds entrance to an idea in a way that involves past interests and experiences and that is imbued with meaningful possibility for future growth and self-actualization. Next, we asked candidates to recall specific dialogues that led to similarly memorable learning experiences (of note, educative dialogues seem far more difficult for candidates to recall). We asked them to consider their own and others' roles in

these kinds of dialogues. What sort of “moves” did they and others make in these discussions? Did they spend more time listening or speaking? Did they ask questions? If so, what sort? Did they render judgments? If so, about what? Did they make assumptions? If so, what kinds of things did they assume? We contrasted these dialogues with dialogues in which candidates dug in their heels and became combative or disengaged. From here, a bit of small-group work resulted in a list of dialogic moves that the class agreed could support learning and a list of moves that might threaten learning.

Before the third class session, candidates read Nelson and Harper’s (2006) “A Pedagogy of Difficulty,” which describes the importance of facing steep challenges that require learners to slow down enough to engage in an iterative process of deep reflection and that can result in candidates entering what the authors call a “liminal state.” In discussion about this piece, our candidates often remark that steep challenges of this sort were not at all common in their schooling experience; looking back, they describe equating the ability to master a new thing quickly with being “good at school” and report that they were unaccustomed to thinking about a seeming lack of forward progress toward mastery of content in a positive light, and yet they seemed clearly to recognize its value. As one of our candidates, Marcus, said, “Until I read [the article], I didn’t have a word for the uneasy but interesting feeling of not knowing something, of being in a kind of ‘useful fog.’ Naming it helped me embrace it. The word ‘liminality’ gives me permission to not know, and to be OK with not knowing, which when you think about it is the best place to be in if you’re wanting to learn something new.” With the concept of liminality at our disposal, we then returned to the lists of supportive and unsupportive dialogic moves that we generated in the previous class session and considered each move in light of its potential utility to help us navigate the liminal state or, conversely, how it might not help. From this conversation came a more robust description of the dialogic environment we hoped to create and what practices and procedures we all might be willing to commit to in order to create it. This piece of collaborative text served as the first draft of our classroom norms.

In the fourth class session, candidates arrived having read Nicolas Burbules’s (1993) seminal theoretical piece on dialogue and an empirical piece on its application by Boyd and Markarian (2015). These two articles helped us consider what Burbules termed the “emotional factors” of dialogue: concern, care, trust, respect, appreciation, affection, and hope. We unpacked these readings by using the ideas they contain to revisit our draft of classroom norms. Candidates had also been tasked with writing a personal narrative

about the intersection of their ethnicity, gender, family history, personal experiences, and the reasons why they chose to pursue a teaching career. (Previously, we had discussed one of the goals of this assignment—to share important aspects of the forces that shaped them with their colleagues—and considered how one might choose to write such an essay that was at once authentic and yet not inappropriate for discussion in a public forum.) We invited any of the candidates who were comfortable sharing their narratives with their colleagues to do so.

In class, these personal narratives served double duty: first and foremost, as a way for candidates to learn more about one another, and second, as an authentic topic of discussion for considering how the developing norms were or were not furthering authentic dialogue. Of note, many of these narratives were incredibly revealing—descriptions of harrowing journeys across borders or oceans, of abuse at the hands of trusted adults, of struggles against the ravages of poverty, and the like—and so authenticity in the dialogues about these narratives seemed to follow merely as a consequence of their gravity. After these discussions, we asked candidates to consider the following three prompts about the norms we had drafted earlier: (a) In what ways did they support the themes, patterns, and features of the kinds of dialogue we desire? (b) In what ways did they fail to do so? (c) What changes or additions could we make to improve them? After this discussion, we revised the norms again to reflect any new insights. From there, we collated, collapsed, explicated, and wordsmithed outside of class in collaboration using a shared “Google doc,” with the goal of capturing a manageable handful of ideas to which we could all commit. When all comments, edits, and suggestions had been addressed to the satisfaction of everyone, we considered the result to be our “official” classroom norms. We drew on them repeatedly throughout the rest of the program and continually revised them whenever we found them to be incomplete or constraining in unhelpful ways.<sup>5</sup>

Over the years, we have found that drawing out the process of norm building over several weeks, anchoring it to challenging texts, centering it on collaboration and consensus, and providing plenty of opportunities to try them out in class as we develop them encourages the development of an inclusive learning community primed both to notice and to value diversity of thought and experience. The lengthy collaboration allows the class to cohere in ways

5. See the appendix for the set of classroom norms we were using in fall 2016. Each cohort of students develops a new set of norms, usually consisting of between 6 and 10 commitments.

that we find reduce us-versus-them thinking and the attendant dangers of attribution bias and confirmation bias, particularly if we return to the norms frequently throughout the course, which we did, for example, on the evening of November 9. As our discussion about how to respond to the children playing “Get the Mexican” ensued, we took the opportunity to remind ourselves of our commitments to one another: consistent with our agreed-upon norms, we would challenge ideas, not the people who expressed them; we would respect others’ opinions, even when we disagreed; and we would assume that the best possible intentions underlay the words and actions of our colleagues. In short, we reminded one another that we were all in it together.

## Facet 2: How We Identified and Leveraged Superordinate Goals

As our candidates continued to share their anecdotes from the day, a pernicious stereotype of the “teacher as hero” seemed to be lurking in the background, making its presence felt in adamant proclamations: “I will *not* stand idly by and let the federal government deport these children” and “If anybody from ICE [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement] shows up at *my* school, they’ll have to detain *me* first if they want access to my kids!” and the like. William Ayers (2001) describes this stereotype as the belief that “schools and teachers are in the business of saving children” (10) and that teachers are the solitary heroes who do the saving. Indeed, many of our candidates seemed to view themselves in this light, as warriors willing to spend themselves against the system, doing battle on behalf of the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. While taking nothing away from William Ayers, we find this desire of our students to act on behalf of and for the benefit of others to be both admirable and inspiring. Indeed, we think this tendency is at the heart of the moral work of teaching, and we certainly do not believe that teachers should strive to be “neutral” or to stifle their own deeply held beliefs. On the contrary, as teacher educators whose goal is to address issues of social injustice, we are aware that when teachers sanitize their beliefs in response to dominant cultural and social mores, the end result can be the maintenance of an unjust status quo (see, e.g., hooks 2014). We suspected, however, that although many of the brave and forceful proclamations that our students were making may have indeed contained the seeds of laudable commitment, some of them may have been little more than in-the-moment expressions stemming from the processing of their own thoughts and raw emotions. After all, the election results were new to everyone. At the very least, although certainly passionate, we found these proclamations to be less than useful in the context of the evening’s discussion be-

cause they tempted us to sidestep the immediate concerns of students and move toward inaction by making it easier to concentrate on grand gestures while ignoring the many opportunities to act in small ways that often wind up making a big difference in the lives of students. Put simply, these proclamations suggested no clear path forward to help candidates frame the kinds of immediate, contextualized, and in-the-moment responses their students seemed to need from them—or at least that they themselves seemed to need to provide. Here, the second facet—identifying superordinate goals—became important. Although many of our candidates seemed focused on wanting to take on the entire executive branch of the federal government on behalf of their students, or to tackle smaller yet seemingly equally challenging tasks (e.g., “I’d be happy just to change the mind of my cooperating teacher, for crying out loud!” said one candidate), we aimed to shift the focus toward a goal on which everyone in the room could agree and that would require cooperation to achieve. As a class, we identified a useful superordinate goal: ensuring the social and emotional safety of the children in the candidates’ care. We agreed that the best way to reach that goal was to involve allies at their school sites—Democrat, Republican, Independent—in the effort. Once we identified that as a common goal worth pursuing, it became clear that the discussion needed to shift, to stop being a raw and unfocused howl about the election results and instead become about how to accomplish the common goal. Of course, this was quite a difficult shift; over and over again, the discourse kept returning to exit polls, demographic breakdowns, campaign promises, and predictions about whether and how those promises might be transmuted into federal policy, all of which had obvious connections to what might happen to the candidates’ students. It was necessary to point out to the candidates with some frequency that although those topics were clearly related to the issues at play and certainly worth discussing, they did not seem directly relevant in terms of the decisions they would be facing at their school sites over the next days and weeks. As difficult as it seemed to be, however, staying focused on the superordinate goal of meeting the immediate needs of the candidates’ students allowed us to move forward together as a class.

### Facet 3: How We Framed Our Discourse as Deliberation Rather Than Dispute

Keeping the superordinate goal of attending to the social and emotional safety of their students in mind encouraged candidates to bracket out issues

that were not within their power to control; however, although such a bracketing was necessary, it was not by itself sufficient to ensure progress toward our goal. To make progress, we also had to carefully reframe our discourse so that it was not a zero-sum, winner-take-all debate about whose views were right and whose were wrong but rather a collaborative deliberation about ideas in common. Again, the aim of doing so was to remove the psychological threat of loss that often drives people to cling to ideological positions by overlooking anything that might undermine those positions while giving undue weight to things that might bolster them—so-called confirmation bias that can entrench one's thinking and thereby intensify partisanship. To do this, as a class we turned our attention explicitly to this task. Our aim was to see if we could identify concepts, ideas, or propositions that were phrased as non-zero-sum and that everyone in class could get behind. After a few minutes of small-group discussions about what these ideas and propositions should be and another few minutes of large-group sharing of small-group ideas, as a class we chose two specific discourse goals: (a) to clarify our primary responsibilities as teacher candidates to keep our students safe and (b) to craft some possible responses—words and actions—to the various scenarios and situations that the candidates thought they might face at their school sites. This was fairly straightforward: I took notes on a whiteboard as students shared their thoughts, writing down potential discourse goals that might work as non-zero-sum propositions. We then organized, edited, and shaped them as a group until everyone in class was on board. Focusing on these two discourse goals made it possible for candidates to include their personal convictions and beliefs in the ensuing discussion but in ways that allowed the discussion not to be about those convictions and beliefs. In other words, it allowed candidates to think about their students' safety in the context of their own personal convictions but without the threat of having to defend those convictions at every turn. This, too, was not easy. Even with our discourse goals explicitly stated, the discourse frequently veered toward divisive partisanship, with our candidates staking out unbending ideological stances via passionate proclamations and utter and total rejection of oppositional ideas. But gentle reminders to consider how those stances and rejections might subvert the discourse goals we set, and thus endanger progress toward our superordinate goal, were generally sufficient to keep the discussion productive. These discourse goals, then, served as guides to keep us all pulling in the same direction and in ways that did not require us to smother our disparate beliefs and deeply held passions beneath a blanket of inauthenticity.

#### Facet 4: How the Proper Noun Approach Allowed Us to Stay Focused on the Task at Hand

The fourth facet, situating our discourse in the concrete reality of people's actual lives rather than the slippery abstractions of imagined ones, was straightforward, at least in terms of the instructor's role. The job was to remind candidates that in this conversation, it was not about "my Latinx kids," or even "my students"; it was about "Enrico, who is afraid his family will be deported because his parents are undocumented farmworkers" or "Audrey, who is Enrico's best friend." These reminders had an important and powerful consequence. They kept the ground beneath our feet by relieving us of the burden of defining—and then defending—a representative case to stand in for all others. This prevented us from exposing ourselves to the naval-gazing paralysis that can sometimes result from pushing a given abstracted example toward its boundary conditions. Although such rumination is one of the great strengths of using abstractions to think with—to find the edges of one's beliefs about a thing—adapting a belief statement to accommodate an extreme can diminish the utility of that belief statement to guide thinking in less extreme situations. In short, we required ourselves to be much more practically oriented. For us, the effect of thinking about actual people was that, first, it counteracted our tendency to think about categories of people as monolithic: it was not enough to say "my Latinx kids," because after all, about one in five Latinx voters cast their ballots for Trump. It kept us focused on the point: to help actual kids—Enrico and Audrey—not draw cartoons or demolish straw men. That, in turn, led candidates to formulate concrete action plans.<sup>6</sup>

#### What Candidates Decided to Say and Do

Our deliberation resulted in three overarching ideas that most candidates decided to explicitly share with their students, appropriately adapted for their various ages. First was the idea that there is a complex interplay be-

6. We note that referring to students by name and sharing details about them with others is not always appropriate. Indeed, "difficult" dialogues are often the kind that call for extra caution in this direction. In such cases, we suggest changing details in ways that obscure the identity of a child but that leave intact the particulars relevant to the discussion. In fact, this is exactly what we did on the evening of November 9: although Enrico and Audrey are real children, the candidate who described them made up their names on the spot; no one but she knows their real names.

tween one's personal identity and one's professional identity. It is cartoonish to believe that teachers can remove themselves from their opinions and stop caring about the results of elections or other important partisan concerns; however, in their roles as employees of the state, as professionals, and as people in positions of power over others, it is inappropriate to put their personal beliefs and opinions ahead of the needs of their students. Most of the candidates decided that their students needed adult role models who were intellectually honest and authentically engaged and who jealously guarded students' safety and well-being, not partisans who prioritized their own personal beliefs.

The second idea, which many candidates also planned to communicate to their students, addressed the most pressing need they saw: the need to comfort distressed students who were worried about having to leave the country and their friends who were also worried. For these candidates, we highlighted the importance of not diminishing the reasonableness of their students' fears but rather communicating clearly and in caring ways about what would follow if the worst came to pass. Candidate Julie, who was Enrico's teacher, and Alice, the candidate whose students were playing "Get the Mexican," for example, planned to make immigration worries the subject of their morning meetings and to share how they felt about their students and what they planned to do in the face of the threat of displacement. They decided to say:

We are all dear friends and each of us is an important member of our learning community. We know none of you wants to leave our class and we hope no one has to. But if someone has to leave, the rest of us will do everything we can to keep you in our lives. We will write you letters and emails and we'll video chat with you often. And even if you can't get our letters and emails or connect with us online, we will keep you in our hearts and memories where our true friends are always present. We will save a chair for you in morning meetings to remind us of you, we will celebrate your birthday even if you're not here to celebrate it with us, and we will reserve a time every week to remind each other about what a good friend you are.

The third idea centered on the decision to take concrete action to address practical concerns at the intersection of school policy and immigration policy. We recognize this idea as a potential avenue for our candidates to bring some of their earlier bold proclamations to fruition, as a way for them to enact some of their deeply held beliefs about democracy, politics, and social

justice in constructive ways in their professional contexts. A number of candidates gathered information from the internet and formed action plans that included (a) learning more about the legal requirements for interacting with ICE agents in their capacity as teachers, (b) working with school administrators to craft a public statement of support of immigrant children and their families and to identify a safe place at school for children to go in case a caregiver or other family member is detained, (c) gathering and distributing information to students and their families about immigrant rights and what to do if ICE agents come knocking (see, e.g., ACLU 2017), and (d) identifying community and professional resources such as social workers and legal experts willing to provide assistance to families in need. (Teaching Tolerance [2017] offers a useful guide for educators that includes many more things teachers might do along these lines.)

### **Using the Four-Faceted Approach to Attend to the Moral Work of Teaching**

We view the four-faceted approach not merely as a method for engaging in difficult dialogue but in much more fundamental terms: as an avenue toward attending to what Sanger and Osguthorpe (2011) identified as “one of the stronger points of consensus in the education literature today, namely, that teaching is an unavoidably moral endeavor” (569). We offer it as a way to help teachers more fully integrate their personal beliefs and their professional responsibilities, as a way to enact responses to the question every educator must answer: What is an education for? Many people become teachers because of its moral purpose, for altruistic reasons, as a way to do good in the world (see, e.g., Brookhart and Freeman 1992; Goodlad et al. 1990; Serow et al. 1992). However, rather than help shape these laudable desires into sophisticated dispositions about teaching and then guide candidates in their enactment, driven by our own awareness of the complexity of teaching, many of us working in teacher preparation programs focus instead on decomposing teaching into discreet tasks to master, presenting 100 different techniques they must learn to implement, hoping against much evidence to the contrary that our candidates will successfully reintegrate them by the time they take on their own classrooms (Grinell and Rabin 2017). Often, however, this bombardment of tasks and techniques overwhelms in their sheer number. In addition, because we focus on techniques, our well-meaning attempts to help our candidates put their altruistic efforts to work can lead to candidates developing a view of planning and teaching lessons as a largely technical exercise. Thus in the span of a few short semesters, teacher educators fre-

quently manage to convert the teacher candidates who find their way to our classes with the goal of fulfilling altruistic desires into novices who deploy technocratic approaches to teaching not because they are technocrats but because we have given them the impression that this is what good teaching requires. It is reminiscent of former poet laureate Billy Collins's (2001) wonderful poem, "Introduction to Poetry," in which he describes wanting to teach his students to "waterski across the surface of a poem waving at the author's name on the shore" (16), but all his students want to do is tie the poem to a chair and beat the truth out of it with a hose. This sets up what Sanger and Osguthorpe (2011) described as "the potential frustration of trying to make sense of and pursue teaching in terms that don't match one's own basic beliefs about the nature and purpose of teaching" (573). We offer this four-faceted approach to difficult dialogue as a robust, straightforward, and non-technocratic way to help teachers situate their personal beliefs within a professional context such that in the best instances, both are the better for it because of the simple fact that when practiced well, this approach requires teachers not to bracket themselves out of the charged situations they find themselves in because they're at school but rather to bring themselves more fully and more authentically to these situations in the service of their students.

## **Appendix**

### **Example of a Set of Collaboratively Developed Classroom Norms**

This set was in operation during the fall 2016 semester.

#### Norms to Support Discourse Goals

To ensure our class is a safe, welcoming, and inclusive learning environment, we commit to the following norms:

1. As Aristotle observed, it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. Thus, we will not interpret the expression of an idea as an expression of belief; we will judge and challenge ideas, not the people who express them; and we will respect others' opinions, even if we disagree. We will do this by assuming that best intentions underlie the words and actions of our colleagues and by maintaining a growth orientation where mistakes are valued.

2. We recognize that there are many valuable ways to participate in class; we will respect the ways of others and seek equity of participation. For example, we recognize that some of our colleagues often prefer not to speak in large group, whereas others tend to speak a lot. We will respect these choices while actively seeking equity of voice. To manage equity of voice in large-group discussions, we may at times:
  - a. Invoke the “shared airspace” rule—wait until at least two people have spoken before speaking again.
  - b. Use “equity sticks” or other technical ways of mediating speaking out in the group (e.g., everyone starts with two sticks; each time you speak, you relinquish a stick; when you’re out of sticks, you wait for others to use their sticks).
  - c. Use “snowball” sharing, where we write our responses out on paper and throw them into the center of the room for others to read aloud.
3. We will recognize that all members of the class—not just the instructor—have contributions to make, and we all commit to making those contributions.
4. We will attend to the direction of discussions and will deliberate toward understanding, not debate toward victory.
5. We will come to class on time, fully prepared, and ready to engage.
6. We will take the time necessary to engage in deep explorations of ideas, and will seek to make explicit connections between this exploration and our own teaching practice.

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