

Cognitive Dissonance:
A Critical Tool in Social Justice Teaching

Paul C. Gorski
Founder, EdChange
Assistant Professor, Integrative Studies
George Mason University
<http://www.EdChange.org>
gorski@EdChange.org
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I usually begin my social justice education workshops the same way: “Raise your hand if you believe the United States was founded on Christian or Judeo-Christian principles.”

Without fail and regardless of audience, the response is the same. Virtually everybody in the room affirms the perseverance of this misperception.

Some misunderstandings are remedied easily. But when new information collides with old prejudices—when new truths battle established beliefs for space in our consciousnesses—we tend to respond with all manner of defense mechanisms. We employ these defenses in response to the psychological stressors that emerge from such inner-battles (Elliot & Devine, 1994). This is especially true when our current beliefs place us in a privileged bubble, as the belief that “the United States was founded on Judeo-Christian principles” does for white people, Christians, and white Christians in particular. It is in these moments, often described as *cognitive dissonance* (a term popularized in Leon Festinger’s [1957] study of a doomsday cult’s stubborn belief persistence), when a learner—any one of us—finds her- or himself grappling with new information in light of old understandings.

I have come to learn that these moments form the critical crossroads of learning, the educational moments of truth, in my social justice teaching. It is the moment when a white teacher first hears the term “white privilege”; when a high school student learns that the U.S. never has named English its “official” language; when a U.S. Christian’s sense of history is shaken by the knowledge that the U.S., in fact, was not founded on Judeo-Christian principles. These are the moments Kincheloe (2005) describes as “untidiness,” as part of a process in which we construct “new *relationships* in the interaction of cultural understandings, the influences of the information environment, familiar stories, idiosyncratic ways of making meaning, and schooling” (p. 115). As an educator, it is my work to create a context in which these new relationships will, indeed, be constructed, rather than one in which students hide or flee from the dissonance that underlies these magnificent learning opportunities.

Continuing with the activity, then, I might ask, “What if I told you that *most* of the land-owning white men we call ‘Founding Fathers’ were not Christians at all? Or that many of these men, including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams, identified as *deists*—people who believed in a higher universal power or god, but did not believe in organized religion or supernatural revelation?”

Setting aside, for a moment, the many other fallacy-laden elements of my statement, such as the notion of a European “founding” of an already-inhabited and civilized land, what is most intriguing about this brief exercise is not the overwhelming Christian-centric miseducation it brings to light. Rather, what I have found most instructive, as a social justice educator, is the range of participants’ *reactions* to what, for many of them, is an introduction to a new frame of reference. Cognitive dissonance theory holds that our reactions to these sorts of psychological stimuli tend to fall somewhere along a continuum on which each point represents a strategy for returning our consciousnesses into cognitive balance (Huegler, 2006; Van Overalle & Jordens, 2002). At one end of the continuum is acceptance of the new idea or framework: a student readily accepts that the U.S. was not, in fact, founded on Christian principles. She shifts her understanding to fit a new reality. At the other end of the continuum is the employment of intellectual armor: a student refuses even to consider the possibility that the U.S. was not founded on Christian principles. She deflects new information to protect the safety of existing assumptions. As a social justice educator, I hope to facilitate an environment in which students find themselves somewhere in the middle, in which they’re willing to grapple with new ideas without accepting them blindly. I want to help my students shed the armor.

This is where the defense mechanisms, and corresponding behavior and body language, come into play. One student, upon hearing that most of the “founding fathers” were not Christian, slumps in his seat and crosses his arms, literally creating distance and a barrier between us. While some educators see resistance in this reaction, I see, at least initially, cognitive dissonance. Another student appears suddenly confounded, arching her eyebrows and peering upwards—a response that might lead some educators to assume she “doesn’t get it.” I, again, see cognitive dissonance. In both instances,

individuals are responding to new information that conflicts with their current beliefs. My job, as an educator, is to create an atmosphere in which more learners respond in the latter way, letting new and sometimes discomforting information into their consciousness, however painful or confusing it might be to do so. My job, as well, is to facilitate experiences in which learners strengthen their wills against the temptation to enact intellectual or emotional armor, the temptation to disallow new information into their consciousnesses for fear of the intellectual and emotional ramifications of doing so.

These realizations—that a considerable portion of my educational work is the facilitation of and the facilitation through cognitive dissonance—has been the most important revelation of my life as a social justice educator-activist. It has changed virtually everything about how I teach about poverty, racism, sexism, imperialism, nationalism, heterosexism, and other oppressions, not because I want to protect the feelings of those who are experiencing cognitive dissonance related to one or more of these issues, but because *everybody* experiences cognitive dissonance related to one or more of these issues.

And my second most important revelation has been this: the best way—perhaps the *only* way—to engage cognitive dissonance as a pedagogical tool in social justice learning is to teach *explicitly* about cognitive dissonance. Of the hundreds of pedagogical strategies, curricular tools, and facilitative approaches I've pursued over the years as a social justice educator, none has affected my teaching and learning spaces more vitally than this one.

Teaching about Cognitive Dissonance

I begin immediately: “Raise your hand if you believe the United States was founded on Christian principles.” But more importantly, I facilitate the conversation—the questions and “push-backs” —that spring from this exercise, not as a lecture about historical reality, but as an exploration of the concept of cognitive dissonance. I do not argue, for example, that many of these men, like politicians of today, feigned Christianity in public addresses and writings while scoffing at Christianity and organized religion in their private letters. Instead, I explain, from the beginning, that one of the keys—perhaps *the key*—to being a social justice learner is the willingness to engage cognitive dissonance, to think most critically about those “truths” about which we are most fervently convinced, particularly in relation to dimensions of identity that privilege us.

Moreover, I return to the concept throughout my workshops and classes. “This might ignite cognitive dissonance for you,” I might say, before an activity that demonstrates that, although most teachers in the U.S. identify as middle class, the vast majority are, in fact, *working* class. “How many of you are experiencing cognitive dissonance?” I might ask following an exercise illustrating that there is no such thing as a “culture of poverty” or a single set of pedagogical strategies that works for all (or even most) Latina/o students.

I have found that, when I introduce the concept of cognitive dissonance early and often, those attending my workshops or classes begin to acknowledge and name their own moments of cognitive dissonance. For example, I recently engaged a group of high school students in a discussion about sexism and gender equity. During an exercise on the socialization of gender identity, a female participant interjected, “Whoa. This is a moment of cognitive dissonance for me.” She explained that she was raised to believe that “girls were good at some things, and boys were good at other things” and that these differences were “purely biological.” After talking through her dissonance for a couple minutes, she concluded, “This gives me something to think about.”

Notice, her response did not invalidate anybody's experience, nor did it deny the possibility that she had been misled. Instead, it illustrated ownership. She acknowledged the possibility that her understanding was, at best, incomplete. And so we entered a cognitive crossroads in a way that enabled the construction of new knowledge. She understood that her temptation to erect a cognitive barrier against this new way of seeing gender identity was a natural response to a lifetime of socialization. (And

this, of course, only deepened her understanding of socialization more generally.) And she knew that everybody in the group would have their moments of cognitive dissonance. No shame.

What made this student's constructive processing of cognitive dissonance particularly important was that it led her to grapple with *internalized sexism*—with her own unintentional support of male supremacy and male privilege (Sharp et al., 2007). But equally important as her increased understanding of gender identity development was her practice reflecting on her own armor, on her own reactions to cognitive dissonance—a critical step for all of us who attempt to be social justice learners. Because when we begin to recognize the ways in which we protect ourselves psychologically from understanding the complexities of the world around us, we open new intellectual windows for ourselves.

Caveats

To be clear: the explicit discussion of cognitive dissonance is not meant to be used as a crutch or to allow people in privileged positions to hijack a conversation. A discussion on racism mustn't become the collective processing of white students' cognitive dissonance, nor is it the job of students of color to help facilitate white students through their racial misunderstandings. If these dynamics begin to emerge, I might name what I see and encourage the person experiencing cognitive dissonance to write through it rather than providing space within the class or workshop for her or him to do so.

In addition, my conscious engagement of cognitive dissonance doesn't erase all instances of resistance—there is no magic bullet. But it has reduced drastically the resistance I experience. It has become invaluable in helping my workshop participants and students understand the process by which we replace old biases with new comprehensions. And it has led to much deeper discussions about the ways in which each of us is socialized to perpetuate injustice and the ways we are socialized to avoid reflecting on the ways we are socialized.

An Exercise in Cognitive Dissonance

I've developed a variety of exercises that help me return to the theme of cognitive dissonance throughout a class or workshop. The most effective of these has been the "Who Said It?" quiz. Participants read, and guess the sources of, a series of quotations by well-known people in U.S. and world history. For example, the quiz begins with this quote:

I have examined all the known superstitions of the world, and I do not find in our particular superstition of Christianity one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded on fables and mythology. Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined and imprisoned. What has been the effect of this coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites; to support roguery and error all over the earth.

Many participants are shocked to learn the source of this quote: Thomas Jefferson.

The quiz continues with quotations that demonstrate similarly critical and complex thinking among people who are, to many, surprising sources. They highlight Helen Keller's staunch anti-poverty advocacy, Mark Twain's anti-imperialist ideas, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, explanation of the connection between racism and class, and so on. Other items demonstrate important sociopolitical complexities, such as Abraham Lincoln's white supremacy and Adam Smith's warnings about corporate capitalism. The quotations were chosen to be surprising, confusing, and unsettling, even to people who believe they have a deep social justice consciousness. (In fact, many of the quotations surprised me when I found and confirmed them.) In other words, I developed this activity in order to encourage cognitive dissonance.

When implementing the “Who Said It?” quiz, I explain that each of us, including me, enters social justice learning with more learning to do. We are socialized to believe we have a deeper understanding of the world around us than we really have. “This is an exercise,” I explain, “in considering what we think we know. It’s an exercise in responding to cognitive dissonance.”

I then distribute copies of the quiz. I ask participants to read the quotations and make their best guesses about the sources of the quotes. When everybody has finished, I ask volunteers to read each quotation aloud. I poll participants on who they believe to be the source of each quotation, then provide the correct answer.

Although discussion inevitably emerges about the content of the quotations, and these discussions deserve adequate attention, I always return to cognitive dissonance through a series of questions:

- *Which of these quotations do you find most surprising, considering its source? Why?*
- *Why have the views of some of these people been erased from mainstream history? Who is served by this whitewashing?*
- *What questions has this quiz raised for you regarding what you think you know about history?*
- *How might acquiring the new knowledge presented by the quiz inform the way you react to other new information you come across?*

I also ask questions that are specific to particular items on the quiz. For example, the quiz contains two quotations illustrating Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, class consciousness—something that largely has been whitewashed from mainstream history. I ask who has seen King’s famous line, “I have a dream,” on a poster in school room or hallway. Most have. I then inquire how many have seen a poster highlighting his criticisms of corporate capitalism hanging in a school. “Why?” I prod. “Who are we protecting?” Another item which results in high levels of cognitive dissonance is one in which Lincoln clarifies that, although he wanted to abolish slavery, he believed, unquestionably, in the supremacy of white people and did not support racial equality. “How do we make sense of this,” I ask, “when Lincoln is exalted, not simply as an abolitionist, but as an anti-racist?” It’s this process of “making sense” through which we practice engaging cognitive dissonance.

Ultimately, the goal of the “Who Said It?” quiz is to help our students or workshop participants practice engaging in and naming cognitive dissonance. When we provide these opportunities through common experiences (such as the quiz), we create moments upon which we can reflect throughout the class or workshop. And we make it easier for people to acknowledge the ideas with which they’re struggling.

An abbreviated version of the “Who Said It?” quiz is included below. You can find the full quiz as well as an answer key on the EdChange Web site at <http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/quizzes.html>.

Who Said It? (A Re-Perception Quiz)

Directions: Who uttered the following quotations? Circle your best guess.

1. "I have examined all the known superstitions of the world, and I do not find in our particular superstition of Christianity one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded on fables and mythology. Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined and imprisoned. What has been the effect of this coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites; to support roguery and error all over the earth."
 - a. Pete Stark (D-California), the first openly nontheistic U.S. congressperson
 - b. Friedrich Nietzsche, German existentialist philosopher
 - c. Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States

2. "It should, it seems to me, be our pleasure and duty to make those people free, and let them deal with their own domestic questions in their own way. And so I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land."
 - a. Maya Angelou, author
 - b. Mark Twain, author
 - c. Jesse Ventura, professional wrestler and former governor of Minnesota

3. "I am a socialist because I believe that socialism will solve the misery of the world — give work to the man who is hungry and idle and at least give to little children the right to be born free."
 - a. Helen Keller, author and lecturer
 - b. Angela Davis, activist, organizer, and university professor
 - c. Che Guevara, Argentine-born Marxist revolutionary

4. "To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers, may at first sight appear a project fit only for a nation of shopkeepers. It is, however, a project altogether unfit for a nation of shopkeepers; but extremely fit for a nation whose government is influenced by shopkeepers."
 - a. Ralph Nader, attorney and consumer rights activist
 - b. Adam Smith, Scottish philosopher and political economist, often described as the "Father of Capitalism"
 - c. César Chávez, farm worker and labor organizer

5. "I am not now, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social or political equality of the white and black races. I am not now nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor of intermarriages with white people. There is a physical difference between the white and the black races which will forever forbid the two races living together on social or political equality. There must be a position of superior and

- inferior, and I am in favor of assigning the superior position to the white man.”
- a. Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth president of the United States
 - b. George Wallace, pro-segregation governor of Alabama in the 60's, 70's, and 80's
 - c. Jesse Helms, former five-term Republican Senator from North Carolina
6. “I appeal to everyone who believes in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, dream to make room at the table of brother- and sisterhood for lesbian and gay people.”
- a. Martina Navratilova, tennis player and activist
 - b. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisconsin), first openly lesbian congresswoman
 - c. Coretta Scott King, civil rights activist
7. “We have deluded ourselves into believing the myth that capitalism grew and prospered out of the Protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifices. Capitalism was built on the exploitation of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor, both black and white, both here and abroad.”
- a. Noam Chomsky, linguist and anti-imperialist scholar
 - b. Michael Moore, labor activist and filmmaker
 - c. Martin Luther King, Jr., Baptist minister and civil rights leader
8. “I'm furious about the Women's Liberationists. They keep getting up on soap-boxes and proclaiming that women are brighter than men. That's true, but it should be kept very quiet or it ruins the whole racket.”
- a. George Carlin, comedian
 - b. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, poet
 - c. John F. Kennedy, thirty-fifth president of the United States
9. “Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking, or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity; to me, the female sex is not the weaker sex.”
- a. Gloria Steinem, journalist and women's rights activist
 - b. Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister of the United Kingdom
 - c. Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the Indian independence movement

Answers:

- | | |
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| 1. C | 6. C |
| 2. B | 7. C |
| 3. A | 8. B |
| 4. B | 9. C |
| 5. A | |
| 10. | |

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