

Lift Every Voice and Sing: Building Equity in Education

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Instructors spend a great deal of time working with the concept of individual equity as it relates to the students they serve. The majority of equity training and dialogue focuses on a macro-level conception of equity. Perhaps it is time to look at equity from a micro perspective. Marginalization does not end when a student leaves the community setting and steps onto a college campus. Learned behavior, internalized by years of experience, cannot be turned on and then turned off when a change in environment or geography occurs. How do educators teach students who have been socialized to believe they have no voice to believe they have a voice that matters?

It is tempting to approach this challenge from the top down (i.e., institution to student). While this strategy looks good on paper, equity must be built—and learning the skills of “voice” must be taught and reinforced—through individual relationships, one student at a time.

To address this challenge, I developed the S-P-E-A-K strategy. This strategy helps students build momentum toward action, and find their voice, while creating equity in the classroom.

S-P-E-A-K!

Safe-Create a safe space for open communication in the classroom. This can be accomplished through setting up ground rules that emphasize that all voices are welcomed and valued, without judgement.

Personal-Acknowledge students as individuals. Learn about and demonstrate interest in their lives outside of class. Ask questions that demonstrate that you are interested in them, their feelings, and their ideas.

Empathetic-Empathy can be very validating. Use empathy to build rapport and demonstrate that you are really interested and engaged with students beyond the course material.

Accessible-Be accessible before, after, and in-between classes. Encourage students to come by your office for a visit. Accessibility also includes creating opportunities for students to find and shape their voice, in and out of the classroom.

Kind-This entire process starts and ends with kindness. The act of kindness is foundational in building relationships, creating confidence in others, and fostering a climate in which students feel confident using their voices.

The inspiration to place my teaching and learning philosophy into words came from a recent career and college promise student taking my sociology course on her high school campus. Through the process of getting to know her, she informed me that she enjoyed composing poetry, offering me the following sample of her outstanding ability and keen perception. Her words are representative of the generation we educators have been entrusted with. It is here that we quiet our voices and carefully listen.

No One Stands Alone, Unless They Stand Alone With Others
Mary Margaret Richardson

*Ameliorate a life's existence
Or disintegrate it with indifference
Hear no, See no Speak no. No.
Like a fading footprint in winter's snow
When reputation is as crucial as life itself
Is success measured on the weight of a trophy shelf?*

*Infotainment strikes its match for you
Everyone watched, no one blew
Has society traded in its lipstick for glue?
This cloak of apathy we float on while we swim
How can you not feel it wearing thin?*

*Silence like a safety blanket for the meek
Appeasing ignorance, letting corruption speak.
Now testimonial card-stacking schemes
Make way for the corrupt to push their dogma, their regimes
And of those I'm told "play the hand you're dealt."
But I never chose those cards, at least not myself.*

*Shuffle...
Bite your lip! Hold your tongue!
Isn't that what we teach the young?
On, so silence is merely the residue of fear?
Odd then they wonder "where go future pioneers."
Oh, and society is framed as the culprit; the criminal, once again?
So should we all arrest ourselves dear friends?
Now this can you apprehend?*

*One flower amongst a patch becomes just a piece
But in solitude, through the sidewalk its worth seems to increase
You're in the way, until you guide the way
In your voice lies the start of revolution, of change
At least that's what the silent say.*

Conclusion

Over generations, education has shifted from being a personal experience for students to being a precursor to the “real world.” Personalizing the learning experience by practicing S-P-E-A-K pays dividends and builds equity in education by giving a voice to those who so desperately want to be heard.

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