

TEACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE AIN'T EASY:

STORIES OF HBCU FACULTY WHO WALK THE TALK

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Abstract

In this article, the thick obligation of teaching social justice at an HBCU in the southern part of the United States is discussed. The landscape of the HBCU is reviewed, and the three authors, all HBCU faculty, share their stories through autoethnography. This methodology is defined as a research and writing approach that works to describe and analyze personal experience in order to better understand cultural experience. Through the authors' autoethnographies, they share their journeys of coming into being social justice activist educators and describe how said journeys impact their daily walk in their classrooms as they work to teach social justice to their students. They also share practical activities used to help students develop social justice dispositions.

Keywords: social justice advocacy, HBCU, autoethnography, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of the Historically Black College and University (HBCU)* is changing. Not only are historically minority-serving institutions facing serious budget cuts, as are most federally-funded institutions at this time of American economic stress, but HBCUs also face growing attrition as they struggle to compete with predominantly white institutions for the very students who, at one time, were guaranteed applicants. Amidst this upheaval and change is a consistently growing commitment to graduating a generation of students who are committed to doing social justice advocacy work in order to affect the much needed change in urban school systems and communities. However, “teaching social justice” is not easy. It requires faculty to, first, do much personal work and reflection in order to authentically take on the work of empowering students with the tools to depart from a university with a social justice disposition armed and willing to do the work necessary for meaningful change to occur. Therefore, in this paper, our goal is to fill a void: the voice of that authentic experience of understanding how to work within schools and communities to effect change for a more inclusive society. Also, our goal is to spark a conversation: a conversation about what HBCU faculty can and should be doing to ensure that we are, first and foremost, walking the talk and truly preparing our students to become change agents. Finally, our goal is to share: share some practical, purposeful, and innovative strategies for cultivating HBCU students’ understanding of what it means, how it looks, and how it feels to sincerely be a social justice-minded advocate.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE (THE BACKGROUND) SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE HBCU

Social institutions can best be understood by examining the social context in which they came to exist (Drewry & Doermann, 2001; Jewell, 2002), and the history of the HBCU experience reveals unique relational and institutional contributors to academic success, as well as

*The terms “Historically Black College and University”, “HBCU”, and “Black college” are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

characteristics that gave the HBCU its identity as an institution committed to social justice. During the Reconstruction era, also known as the Freedmen's Education Movement, Black Americans' efforts to secure an education were blocked by race and class privilege. Established during the middle to late 1800s (Anderson, 2006), Black colleges were among the first educational institutions in the South to embrace a social justice philosophy by opening their doors to everyone despite their existence within a segregated society (Grimes-Robinson, 1998; Jewell, 2002). Lee Anne Bell (2007) defines social justice as

both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.... The process for attaining the goal of social justice, we believe, should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change. (pp. 1-2)

As an institutional framework that was designed to be *inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities*, HBCUs act as social equalizers for groups who have been denied equal opportunity in education and in society and whose academic talents were unappreciated or unwelcomed elsewhere due to race, ethnicity, or gender. They continue to offer Black students, and anyone who attends, intellectual and stimulating environments, greater interaction with diverse populations, and more enhanced faculty-student contact compared to Black students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Allen et al., 2007). However, HBCUs are not only beneficial to its students but also to the surrounding communities as well. One of the main goals was to educate Black students, not just to build knowledge, but to use that knowledge to improve the race and the conditions of Black communities (Banks, 1995).

At the center of the Black struggle for equality and dignity, HBCUs played, and continue to play, important roles in the perpetuation of Black culture, the improvement of Black community life, and the preparation of the next generation of Black leaders. HBCUs served

as “catalysts and agents for social change” (Allen & Jewell, 2002, p. 249). Students at HBCUs made important contributions during the Civil Rights movement, moved towards attaining human rights, and worked to remove the stigmas attached to race (Allen, et al., 2007). It is within this historical context that we argue that despite the long history of social justice and civil rights activism, teaching social justice at an HBCU has become increasingly more complicated.

This complication is rooted, initially, in the fact that HBCUs are becoming increasingly diverse. Though HBCUs have always been known to attract students who are low-income, first generation, single parents, or from underrepresented minority groups*, a recent report published by the Center for Minority Serving Institutions asserts that

[T]oday, a full quarter of HBCUs across the nation have at least a 20% non-Black student body. Some people worry that the changing composition of HBCUs endangers the very aspect of these institutions that makes them unique; others argue that diversity makes these institutions stronger, by fostering mutual respect and an appreciation for Black culture among a broader population. (Gasman, 2015, p. 6)

Teaching social justice at an HBCU with a diverse student population has advantages and disadvantages because there are assumptions that are often made about the students who attend HBCUs and/or what it means to attend an HBCU. In the conversation about HBCUs, we must be mindful of the risk we run in stereotyping the HBCU: “they are all the same, and they all wholly and fully encompass this aforementioned social justice philosophy.” Though a commitment to social justice is the essence of the HBCU identity, this is not the truth for all of them all of the time. Furthermore, not all HBCU students embrace this philosophy all the time. Therefore, it is our concern that Black students at our HBCU must understand that their Blackness does not automatically make them social justice advocates. Likewise, we impress upon White students that their matriculation at an HBCU does not give them

*Non-Black, including Native American, African, Latin American, Caribbean, less affluent White, White female, and Jewish students all have benefited from HBCUs’ commitment to social justice since the segregationist age of 1895-1954 (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Willie, 1994).

a “social justice advocacy pass.” Now, more than ever, each student must comprehend what it means to be a social justice advocate: someone who incorporates an embodied understanding of concepts like justice, equality, diversity, and advocacy into his/her daily walk. This is the disposition that will help them build and sustain partnerships as they leave their own P12 experiences behind and enter the working world. While the percentage of children living in poverty steadily increases, the amount of time spent teaching prospective teachers how to meet the needs of this population is not (Addy, Engelhardt, & Skinner, 2013). It is crucial that prospective teachers, as well as students entering the field of human services, learn effective strategies to work with children of diverse backgrounds. They cannot be allowed to assume that simply *attending* an HBCU gives them the tools. They must be *taught* to recognize oppression and that there is injustice in the world. Students of all majors have a responsibility as citizens to promote an inclusive society where the inalienable rights of individuals are protected irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality or religious orientation.

METHODOLOGY

In order to best share our stories of how we walk the talk of teaching social justice at an HBCU in the southern part of the United States, we utilized autoethnography as our research methodology. Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, 2004; Jones, 2005). Our personal experiences of becoming and being social justice-minded educators are of particular importance as we work to prepare students at HBCUs to enter society as social justice activists with strong social justice dispositions.

Autoethnography developed in part as a way to “push back” from the view of research as master, universal narratives that often excluded the views of subjugated groups. It allows us an opportunity to hear the stories that would otherwise be silenced; and, in doing so, allows us the opportunity to more deeply understand those who are different from us. Autoethnography is both process and product. A researcher

uses a combination of the tenets from autobiography and ethnography to write the autoethnography as she acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research.

For the authors, this style of reflective writing was critical to the success of this project. With an epistemological framework rooted in Black Feminist Thought, an autoethnographical approach allowed us to share our personal narratives as social justice educators. According to Ellis (2004) "feminism has played a role in the narrative/autoethnography movement. It has contributed significantly to legitimizing autobiographical voice associated with reflexive ethnography" (p. 47). Several principles of Black Feminist Thought support our methodological approach: "legacy of struggle," the role of Black women intellectuals, and Black feminism as self-definition for empowerment.

The legacy of struggle refers to the shared history and standpoint Black women have regarding their historical struggles. As academicians, we reflect and use that shared history and legacy to root our experiences. As Black women intellectuals, we also are responsible for participating in the ongoing quest for self-definition necessary for empowerment. Hill Collins (2009) states

Black feminist thought cannot challenge intersecting oppressions without empowering African American women. Because self-definition is key to individual and group empowerment, ceding the power of self-definition to other groups, no matter how well-meaning or supportive of Black women they may be, in essence replicates existing power hierarchies. (p. 40)

Finally, we utilize Black feminism in our writing to support the importance of self-definition as a tool for empowerment. We recognize that we cannot teach our students to be social justice educators if we do not first teach them to learn who they are and what they stand for. We recognize that this important task will be reflected in the writing of our personal narratives.

Once our methodology was chosen, we began to work on our method. How would we share our personal, seemingly individual stories in a way that also allowed our shared standpoint to remain at the forefront? In our writing, we recognize the potential for healing both

in/for ourselves and for our readers. This therapeutic element is not lost or sanitized during the writing; instead, it is highlighted, acknowledged, and shared with the audience and each other. We found comfort in knowing that our experiences shared similarities and historical significance. In writing our sections outlining our “talks,” we recognized that even though we had come from different walks, we ended at similar destinations and with similar goals—to share our personal narratives in the hopes of helping others along their journey.

THE TALK (OUR STORIES: HOW WE CAME TO BE SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS)

FRAN'S TALK

I am a Civil Rights baby who grew up in a segregated world of overt racism in the Southeastern United States. My Daddy was active in the community serving as an advocate for the homeless and representing a voice against racism and discrimination for who were then called ‘Negro’ men and women. It was his form of promoting social justice. My Godfather, Daddy’s best friend, was the Chief of Legal Redress for the NAACP. They worked together. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed on April 4, 1968 in Birmingham, Alabama. Sixteen days later, my father died; the story of his last day is questionable. I was told my Daddy went to the jailhouse, and in the early morning he was brought home by someone, allegedly White policemen. The next day his cold body was discovered on the steps in front of our home; his eyes shut from life forever. I was told not to question; it was best to be quiet and remember. So I did what I was told. Silence was a double-conscious way for Negroes to survive in the White world. From the brutality and overt racist acts of White Americans during those years, you learned when to speak and when to be silent.

Poignant memories flash through my mind from childhood. My childhood was peppered with sickening feelings of oppression. I walked to the back of the bus with my Daddy and watched his mortification as he was told to hang his head in shame for not giving up our seats fast enough. My Grandfather and I had to walk on the ‘right’ side of the street downtown, so Granddaddy said. As a little girl, I was not sure which side was the ‘right’ side; yet I noticed as Whites passed us,

I watched him hang his head and look away as if he had done something wrong.

I went around the back of the movie theater and walked with my friends up the fire escape to see the movie *Gone with the Wind* in the cold balcony. There was no bathroom for us. If we got hungry, we could go back down to the front window and buy the day-old, leftover popcorn. I could read the ‘Colored only’ sign before I could read any book. As a young child, I saw a Negro man with burnt feet in his socks and burnt fingers hanging from a tree. I saw a cross burning in the field that same day and more than one time before then; even though my friend’s father told us to lie in the floor of the car, I peeked anyway. He tried to comfort us by saying it was a dummy; all I remember is fear in my belly.

I never went to an integrated school from kindergarten all the way through four years of college at an HBCU. From high school, I left my close-knit family and my all Black community to go to college at an HBCU. In all my one race schools, my teachers emulated excellence. They accepted nothing less from me. They were tough and unyielding, challenging with the highest levels of expectation. Yet, their love and caring were nurturing, just like a mother is to the children she births. My interactions with them were personal opportunities to mentor and groom me for the world of injustices. They modeled what I had to become as an educator and as an advocate for Black men and women. Until I went to college, all of my teachers were Black men and women.

Racism shaped my truths about the world, my soul, and my spirit. The bitterness that prevailed in my soul could have grown into the venom that would poison my spirit forever, but I learned the best ways to survive in this America is to consciously be like them. To tell the stories was, and remains, imperative so that the stench of burnt souls will impact our lens of the still omnipresent injustices in our world.

SHAWN’S TALK

I am an urban baby. Being born and raised in a large, Northern city shaped my views early on regarding the “haves” and the “have nots.” My urban background allowed me an increased exposure to people, events, and things that shaped my worldview. In the fifth grade, I was

awarded a scholarship to attend a private school outside the city. This experience continued to build upon my intuitive notions of fairness and equity. At that institution, I was one of the “only” Black children. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, it was a beginning of my journey in isolation. I was given a glimpse into a life I had only seen on television, and I realized that it was not just a fantasy. This was how real people lived: but not my mother and me. I took an hour ride, both ways, to the school and lived with my mother in a bedroom we shared in my aunt’s row home. Every day I shifted, both visually and mentally, from my urban home to the suburban paradise where my school was located. This continued through 6th grade, and again in 9th grade. In total, in my thirteen years of being in the educational system, I attended 10 different schools.

Although my educational experiences and urban situatedness were preparing me for me, it was not until I went to college where I realized how all my experiences were leading me towards my passion. I attended a large, predominantly white institution in a rural location. During my time as a student, approximately 2% of the student population was comprised of Black students. I gathered all my experiences and began, in earnest, my path as a social justice advocate and educator. My first intentional experience in social justice activism came when I joined the leadership in the Black Caucus. We worked as a group to challenge the university to provide better resources for underrepresented students. I worked with other students to mobilize, educate, and protest the hostile environment. Through that experience, which included a sit-in, many organizational meetings, and ultimately an arrest (the charges were dropped), I learned an immense amount about myself. It taught me about the importance of perception. The importance of standing up for and fighting for what I believe to be true. Ultimately, it taught me the importance of fighting for social justice and equity—as these basic threads would guide all my future activities.

Once I left my urban cocoon, I realized that even though I had been exposed to a variety of settings and people, I always went home to my ‘hood. Once I was in college, there was no “safe” space. Not only did I, and the other Black students on campus, deal with isolation and loneliness in the classroom, but we also had to endure similar

conditions in our dorms, the downtown area, the games, etc. This type of unrelenting isolation highlighted the injustices surrounding under-represented groups.

In order to push back, I migrated towards other “urban babies,” and we began to support each other and strategize. What could we do to support each other through this perilous journey? What type of support did we need? What was the university’s role in providing, advocating, and supporting us? As we gathered weekly, and sometimes daily, to tease out these questions, we were guided by the Black faculty and staff on campus who provided us wisdom and insight. They saw, and understood, our struggle; yet ultimately, they knew that the most important role they could play was that of the ally. It was not their battle to fight.

Their support, guidance, and wisdom allowed me to speak up on issues of social justice while “just” an undergraduate student. We recognized that if we wanted change, we would have to become change agents. I began speaking up to my friends about the injustices (which quickly got me labeled as “radical”), and began challenging my professors on their stance on issues of social justice and equity. Across campus, we insisted the University notice us through peaceful protests and demonstrations. During the basketball games, we sat through the National Anthem, and then would stand to sing the Black National Anthem. This act of solidarity was designed to show the University that we could not, would not, be ignored.

Our biggest organized act was a sit-in in our University’s telecommunications building—the hub of the campus. As one of the leaders of the Black Caucus, I assisted in organizing for the event, as well as in the numerous planning sessions that helped us prepare tactically. The day of the sit-in started as any other day on our campus. Students milled about going to classes and hanging out. Faculty and staff walked hurriedly across campus to their next meeting or assignment, while over 150 Black students walked orderly and silently to the telecommunications building. We entered the building in the same manner, and then sat on the floor throughout the entire building with our arms crossed with our neighbors. We never spoke to the staff that gave us puzzling looks. Once inside and seated, we waited.

The building was strategically selected with help from a Black faculty member as a good location because of the ground level windows (to get food in and people out if necessary) and lots of restrooms. The takeover resulted in the National Guard being called in. We were arrested (charges later were dropped) and talks resumed. The result of our action brought about change—a position was created at the upper administration level devoted to “underrepresented” groups. We were allowed input into selecting the first hire. It never occurred to me that I could be kicked out of school; I was either passionate or stupid, or passionately stupid. But it was another pivotal opportunity for me to recognize that whether or not they want to see or hear me—I will be seen and will be heard.

DAWN'S TALK

My journey to becoming a social justice educator has not been a simple one. I was raised in the Bronx, New York in the middle of the Hip-Hop generation*. Therefore, I am a Hip-Hop baby! Hip-Hop was born at 1720 Sedgwick Avenue in the Bronx, New York as DJ Kool Herc deejayed at his sister's birthday party. But Hip-Hop was much more than just some music played at a birthday party. It was an outcry – the beginning of a movement. Forced ghettoization and deleterious conditions stemming from institutional racism set the stage for Hip-Hop to be. Young people in the inner-city were struggling. George (1992) concurs. He writes,

A terrible school system, an addictive welfare system, and a government that lets drugs pour into the community have, along with twin turntables, somehow conspired to make these young people come up with their own distinctive brand of entertainment. (p.44)

However, we did not merely *entertain* ourselves with Hip-Hop. Hip-hop became a movement, and I became an integral part of that movement. When Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five told everyone,

*The Hip-Hop generation is defined as people, especially Black urban people, born between 1965-1984. The intricacies of this generation are discussed in Bakari Kitwana's 2002 text, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*.

“Don’t push me ‘cuz I’m close to the edge; I’m trying not to lose my head. It’s like a jungle, sometimes it makes me wonder how I keep from going under” in 1982, I felt it. I felt the reverberations throughout a people who were struggling to find the right outlet and voice for their frustrations. This truth-telling inspired me. I was also deeply influenced by the fierce, empowered women of Salt-N-Pepa, who declared their independence and invited young, Black America to “talk about sex” in 1990 and the strong, no non-sense sound of Queen Latifah who, in 1989, stood proud as she proclaimed “Ladies first”, teaching me to be proud of myself as a Black woman. I was also inspired when, in 1989, KRS-One said, “You Must Learn”, asserting that education was key; however, nothing was as it seemed on the surface, so we must always look at life through a critical lens. Charges like these and learning through the Stop the Violence Movement in 1989, that I, indeed, had the power to change the social conditions with which I were unhappy, solidified Hip-Hop’s status in my life and my very presence as a social justice activist in the making. My talk became about preventing the self-destruction of my people and my counterparts.

For me, Hip-Hop is about revolution. In its very essence, at its very core, it speaks to change - social change and resistance against oppression, against the norm, against the “box.” Hip-Hop represents (yes, even today) the refusal to stay the same, resistance against the status quo, and open arms to newness. As a young woman, I was exposed to the music industry as a dancer in music videos and live performances with various artists. I travelled the world as a back-up dancer. I learned the ins and outs of the industry. I also learned the dos and don’ts of the industry. I learned how to navigate myself as a young woman in an industry dominated by men. I took the lessons learned from Hip-Hop and scholars like bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Joan Morgan into my adulthood and career as a social justice activist. As I moved through my daily life as an educator - first for elementary school-aged children and now for college-aged students - I have become more and more committed to walking the talk that I had learned earlier in my life.

THE WALK (WHAT WE ARE DOING NOW TO BE SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS)

FRAN'S WALK

The rationale for preparing students for social justice advocacy is clear. Today's generation did not experience the injustices of the civil rights era; they heard about it, but did not experience it. Today, they see injustices that involve much more than race, more than issues of Black Americans as a minority verses the injustices of the majority. Now, it is my turn to model what it takes to be an educator and an advocate for justice. I began to work as higher education clinical faculty and then as the Elementary Education Program Coordinator of the very program and at the same HBCU from which I graduated. My passion for teaching soared when I became responsible for preparing students to teach. It is my Daddy's last breath that I must breathe into my advocacy for preparing them for an inclusive society.

In addition to preparing candidates to teach, my research interests escalated for developing social justice dispositions and advocacy in the candidates. I wrote an introductory-level, general education* course for them to explore their advocacy titled "Promoting Social Justice through Education"**. The goal of this course is to prepare prospective teacher candidates and students of other majors to be committed to teaching for social justice and becoming social justice advocates for an all-inclusive society. Students research and develop written definitions of social justice; explore areas of oppression and injustices locally,

*A general education course is open to all majors.

**The course is writing intensive to promote the most intense self-reflection. It provides students with the opportunity to develop an approved written proposal for a service learning project/problem based learning project based on the analysis of a series of complex, real-world problems regarding the social justice for parents and students within a specific low-income, high-need school community. The course emphasizes the ways students can advocate for parents and students in a community and use community agencies and resources to implement a project. This course emphasizes community demographic research, cultural competence, self-awareness, self-reflection, and working with culturally as well as linguistically diverse students, parents, schools and the community.

statewide and globally; and plan a project that is consistent with their research.

The conceptual framework for students taking this course is based upon the principle that the actions of individuals and/or organizations consciously flow from their beliefs that social justice is an implied goal for improving the quality of life of public school children, parents, and the communities in which we live. This course embodies the following principles:

- **Justice:** Everyone should be treated fairly in both the benefits and the obligations of society. No individual or group should be favored over another person or group.
- **Equality:** Everyone has the right to political, legal, social and economic equality. Everyone has the right to the same treatment regardless of race, sex, religion, heritage, or economic status.
- **Diversity:** The differences in culture, language, heritage, gender, religion and sexuality are not just tolerated, but celebrated as strength.
- **Advocacy:** Take action on behalf of self and others that promotes equity and equality

Self-reflection is at the core of each class session. At the end of the course, students develop their own social justice definition and determination of their advocacy. As a common foundation, the class embraces Lee Ann Bell's (2007) definition for its social justice conceptual framework, and students unpack each phrase of the definition during the course.

Students participating in the course write their definition of social justice during the first class and write a reflection on what they learned about social justice as well as their post definition. In each of the semesters, 100% of the course participants have expanded their post views and beliefs about what social justice means to them. One student wrote:

Before this course I just thought of social justice as being fair to everybody and to make sure we stop the prejudices between Blacks and Whites. Now I understand about all of the identities

of oppression that exist in our society today. Being fair is just a minute part of the whole of social justice. Understanding how privilege operates, how disadvantages occurs, and how people tend to deny that such injustices occurs has been my take away from this course. When I become a teacher, I better understand strategies to counter oppression and how I can work as a change agent to counter injustices.

Another student writes:

My original definition of social justice was really quite simple; however, I felt it was complete then. I can now say that I see social justice is an all-encompassing concept that needed to be addressed at all times. By this I mean, social justice is not only about a black man being pulled over by the police. It is also about the impoverished becoming financially stable. It is about the education system being equal across the board regardless of the community it serves. It is about meeting first generation immigrants who do not speak the language we think they should speak and ensuring that they do not become a victim of poverty because they do not speak English. It is so much more than I ever thought about before.

Course participants began to see social justice in powerful, new ways after the course. Like the students quoted above, many cited transformative beliefs and values about advocacy in areas they had not considered previously.

SHAWN'S WALK

The message I share now with my students is “Be seen! Be heard!” I often share with them one of my favorite quotes from Audre Lorde, “Silence is the voice of complicity.” Working with students and instilling the love of social justice and activism has, at times, been harder than I ever imagined. Due to the narrative of “postracialism,” many students don’t believe there is anything left to fight. They, like most people, have a harder time recognizing and responding to the shifting form of racism that is more insidious.

There are several activities I use regularly when attempting to stress the importance of social justice and equity with students. I want

them to see their role in systemic oppression, as well as their potential lack of critical consciousness in their daily lives. One exercise involves having students go through their closets and examine the origins of their clothing. Students must look at their clothing labels, and mark on a map the location of where their clothing was made. This exercise forces students to examine their role and interaction with persons from different countries. Under what conditions were these clothes made? What is your role in supporting these conditions when you buy this item of clothing? For many students this is a rude awakening of how very simple choices can still part of a system of oppression. For students at an HBCU, the added layer of respectability politics is integrated into the discussion and creates a rich and potentially meaningful dialogue.

Many times, I will follow up this exercise with an exercise that requires students to wear the same outfit for 7 days. Students may wash the clothes daily, if they so desire, but they must wear the same outfit and journal about, both their reactions and the reactions of others. Students at an HBCU often report great difficulty and resistance to this exercise. Again, the ugly topic of respectability politics rears its head and convinces students that their primary focus should be on their outward appearance.

Forever hopeful, this urban baby does not give up. I integrate current topics into classes every opportunity I get. I recognize that the classroom is indeed a place of great possibilities. When major stories occur, we may table the planned lecture for that day and instead discuss what is happening in the world. It is important to me that I graduate students with the ability to critically think *and* consciously act. I encourage students to find a variety of outlets for their angst, recognizing that there are multiple ways to be an activist. Choose one.

DAWN'S WALK

As a university professor, I push all of my students to reflect on what social justice means and the work it takes to become social justice activists. During the first week of class, in all of my classes, I work with my students to develop a "Social Justice Purpose Statement." As they begin the activity, I explain that our university is com-

mitted to the preparation of school personnel who effectively model social justice in a diverse 21st century learning community. In order for them to “model social justice,” they must begin by reflecting upon who they are, how they arrived in this place, and where they are going. I assert that this will help them to stay focused on the importance of becoming successful students and effective teachers. I implore them to think; then, share the following information with their classmates:

Who am I (racially, culturally, spiritually, etc.)?

Why am I here (college, WSSU, Education major, etc.)?

How did I get here (support systems, family, community, etc.)?

Where am I going (emotionally, mentally, career-wise, etc.)?

What does this course have to do with me (why is it important, how will it help me bridge the achievement gap)?

Through this reflective activity, I push students to take time for discussion and introspection. I believe this to be a crucial step in their development as social justice activists.

In my effort to further walk my talk, I also developed an introductory-level general education course called *Advancing the Academic Success of Black Males*. This course is designed to push students of all majors as they embrace the concept of social justice, engage research on Black male academic progress in America, and think critically about how they (as majors from all disciplines) can best interact with Black male youth as they traverse their individual worlds - now and in the future. Throughout the semester, we work through accomplishing the following objectives:

- Interpret and evaluate current research on Black male educational progress in American P12 schools;
- Deconstruct cultural deficit theories of Black learning;
- Analyze how stereotype threat impacts Black male success;
- Design culturally responsive learning environments by identifying, summarizing, and analyzing culturally relevant teaching practices;

- Discuss strategies for improving literacy development in diverse academic settings;
- Generate culturally sensitive classroom management and discipline strategies that demonstrate socially just classroom environments

At the time this article was submitted, I will have taught two sections of this course, one per semester. Each semester, I become a better professor, and each semester, the course is more dynamic, interesting, and thick. When I engage my students in conversations about social justice, they come alive, and become inspired. They become inspired to live fully, to change the world, and to change themselves. Most importantly, they become inspired to be the change they wish to see in the world and truly walk the talk.

IMPLICATIONS (WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN)

The process of developing our autoethnographies was a therapeutic one. As university educators who are committed to social justice, it was important for us to dig into our own histories to help us better understand and be advocates ourselves. One major implication of this autoethnographic study is that very concept: in order to do social justice work, one must be social justice oriented. One should be willing to do the introspective work necessary to help us “push back” from the master narrative and hear our own stories so that those stories might evolve reactions from others.

Another implication is that we must deliberately walk the talk if we hope to truly prepare students from HBCUs to become social justice activists. If one of the goals of the HBCU is to impart students with the knowledge to improve their communities, then we must fully acknowledge and embody this social justice mission. Full acknowledgement and embodiment of this mission is not just about telling students that they must be social justice activists, but it is also about modeling the behavior through transparency and action. We must tell our stories to our students so that they can understand that activism cannot be purchased a la carte an HBCU degree. Social justice activism is a disposition that is cultivated and perpetuated through careful and sustained mentoring. Mentoring matters; and the deep mentoring

and safe harboring that takes place on HBCU campuses can be a key in the development of a social justice disposition, and it speaks to the pertinence of transparency.

We must also model social justice-oriented behavior through our actions. Fran is hands-on with her students as they develop service-learning projects for local schools. Shawn immerses her students in eye-opening experiences that push their respectability politics. Dawn facilitates regular, deep introspection of students' pasts in order to help them imagine their futures as activists who sincerely understand and respect the work that it takes to develop a social justice sensibility. It is through these actions - deliberate, intentional actions - that we provide students with the types of authentic experiences necessary to truly "effect change for a more inclusive society."

CONCLUSION

In this article, the idea of teaching social justice at an HBCU in the southern part of the United States is discussed; a brief history of the HBCU is shared. The three authors, all HBCU faculty, share their stories through autoethnography. Autoethnography is defined as a research and writing approach that works to describe and analyze personal experience in order to better understand cultural experience. Through the authors' personal narratives, they share their journeys of coming into being social justice activist educators and describe how said journeys impact their daily walk in their classrooms as they work to teach social justice to their students. They also share practical activities used to help students develop social justice dispositions. The authors believe that the actions of individuals and/or organizations consciously flow from their beliefs that social justice is an implied goal for improving the quality of life of P12 school children, parents and the communities in which we live. Walking the talk is not easy, but it is necessary.

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