

An Episode in Allyship Responding to the Uprising

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Abstract

In the midst of dual pandemics, the racial justice uprising and Coronavirus pandemic, I, a Black associate professor of education, took on the challenge of having my White colleague as an apprentice for racial justice work. While co-teaching a critical diversity course, I decided to strategically engage our College of Education in a robust conversation on racial equity and reconciliation. An unanticipated event in that process was that my apprentice would become an effective ally and co-conspirator. I share this insight of our process in hopes that aspiring allies might improve their effort.

Keywords: apprentice model, black humanity, dual pandemics, racial ally

In the midst of dual pandemics, the racial justice uprising and Covid-19 pandemic, Katie and I started co-teaching a course titled Culturally Responsive Pedagogy & Classroom Management (CRPCM) to 75 newly admitted online Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) students. Katie Brkich is a White woman and I am Black. We are both tenured associate professors and transplants to the area. I am a veteran critical multicultural educator and Katie is a veteran science educator. As colleagues, we have worked for years to design and develop a MAT program focused on cultures and communities. I am the program director and part of my responsibilities include making suggestions to the chair for who should be

assigned specific courses. Against my recommendation, Katie was assigned to teach the CRPCM course which is beyond her professional expertise. Frustrated, I believe appointing a science educator to teach a diversity course undermines the credibility of social justice expertise and the overall rigor of the course. Still, our rapport allowed us to strategize a plan (namely co-teaching with an apprenticeship model) to survive the summer 2020 semester and honor the integrity of the course. What follows is a retelling about how the murder of George Floyd sparked an episode of strategic allyship in the backdrop of us co-teaching. This strategic allyship involves instances where a person uses their privilege (tangible & intangible) to the advantage of a marginalized community; champions proposals that structurally reduce/eliminate oppression; works in community while led by marginalized experts/leaders.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder and the subsequent uprising, many "allies" and bystanders were awakened to the pandemic of systemic racism and anti-Blackness. At work, in the College of Education, this enlightenment prompted a college wide internal discussion on how to do better. When our White dean sent out a college wide email naming "systemic anti-Black racism", I felt validated but also distrusting, angry, and already defeated. These mixed emotions stemmed from centuries long denial or deference to Black oppression and a history of performative reactions after a major incident that quickly dissipates. Our university sits less than 100 miles from the site of the Charleston Church Massacre and I vividly remember the audible silence in our college in the aftermath. In 2014, when I chose to work in a southern predominantly White institution (PWI), I understood that I, a Black woman with a leftist social justice orientation, would be lonely in my experiences and perceptions. But I didn't realize that I'd also be alone in my humanization of Black people.

Dylan's Roof's murder of nine worshippers during bible study seemed so heinous and explicit that I expected my colleagues to publicly acknowledge anti-Blackness and denounce White supremacy. That conversation never happened—at least never in my presence. So, five years later and with the killings of many other Black people at the hands of police and White supremacists, I was disenchanted with the college but also emboldened by my rage. As Baldwin frames it,

To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time — and in one's work. And part of the rage is this: It isn't only what is happening to you. But it's what's happening all around you and all of the time in

the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, indifference of most White people in this country, and their ignorance. (Baldwin, 1961)

As a critical multicultural educator and a Black feminist, I'm often too conscious for my own mental wellness. I'm in a state of palatable rage almost, almost all of the time- especially in my work.

When the dean stated, "Please share your thoughts and ideas on how we can 'turn our thin words into thick actions,'" I waited to see if and how others—namely non-Black colleagues—would take up the call. When a few did respond with the equivalent of "thoughts and prayers" but no tangible commitments to change or accountability, the trauma of working amongst friendly adversaries who justify their silence as politeness and non-confrontational was amplified. Enraged, I wrote to our college listserv:

*Dear Dean X and our administration team,
I appreciate the gesture of this message and I'm excited about the possibilities for accountability and systemic change inherent in it. Below, I've sketched out a few college-wide changes that I think would advance the mission of mitigating racialized educational disparities in the college:*

- *Anti-racist, and anti-Blackness training for faculty, staff, and admin*
- *Racial battle fatigue support groups for Black folks led by mental health professionals*
- *Revised curriculums, especially in teacher preparation, that explicitly address racism, anti-Blackness, systemic oppression, etc.*
- *Imbed at least one critical diversity course in all degree programs*
- *A sincere apology for how Black faculty, students, and staff have been socially and systemically marginalized and tokenized in the college*
- *Scholarship for students experiencing marginalization across intersecting identities (Black & low income, queer & Latinx, etc.)*
- *An authentic valuing of faculty expertise on these matters instead of an emphasis on generalists*

I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

What followed was a constellation of people affirming my sentiments, passively or aggressively resisting my ideas, and adding other

actionable suggestions. As always, there were a few who self-congratulated their “allyship.” I also received a few private emails from colleagues and administrators seeking clarity about my suggestions, affirming my thoughts, or defending me.

Immediately after sending my email, I panicked. Because we had been working closely on the CRPCM course, I called Katie to unpack my feelings. When I agreed to mentor Katie, I hadn’t anticipated current events dominating and impacting our course content and pedagogy. In both my engagement with the CRPCM course and with the college, I sought validation while assessing if my mentorship was fruitful. I questioned, was I jeopardizing my career? Was I challenging our students too much? Was I too bold or rude or demanding? Was I unprofessional and showing up as a stereotypical angry Black woman? Katie validated me then and continued to do so after each colleague responded. She did so by mostly listening, paraphrasing my sentiments, situating my practices in the literature I exposed her to, and never undermining my sanity or my professionalism. She also agreed to let me lead her through the process of being a strategic ally.

Throughout the following months, I had countless meetings with administrators and faculty to discuss my ideas. Some students actively resisted my pedagogy citing that All Lives Matter. Repeatedly, I was asked to do unpaid emotional and intellectual labor of defending my ideas and humanity. Together, Katie and I strategized how to address or not address commentary, requests, assignments, and responses from colleagues. Katie, with her cultural lens of Whiteness and better knowledge of the university stakeholders, was able to provide invaluable context to some expressed dispositions. I, as both an active mourner confronted with the systemic oppression of anti-Blackness and with my history of work in anti-Blackness, found a safe professional place to grieve and exhibit frustration and hurt without my humanity and professionalism being questioned.

In our CRPCM course, we pivoted to center anti-Blackness and Black feminism because Breonna Taylor and other Black womxn weren’t being centered alongside George Floyd. Katie followed my lead and willingly championed my proposals to structurally reduce and eliminate oppression in classrooms. For the first time in my career, I felt like I had a space to emotionally process the trauma of being Black in America at work and in the work.

Concretely, Katie humanized me, or—as Zora Neal Hurston (2020) might put it—she treated me White. Although I had to coach her through the process, she allowed me to. When I was paranoid about my experiences of microaggressions, she provided real examples of microaggressions. When I was anxious, she did not minimize my experience. Instead, she listened, echoed my concerns, and asked “What can I do to help you?” When I was overwhelmed, she lessened my workload. Periodically, I received cards of encouragement in the mail. Not once did she question my professionalism or my humanity. When I wanted to make a statement at our weekly faculty meetings that failed to even acknowledge the uprising, she made me a “Stop Killing Black People” t-shirt that I designed and expedited the shipping to my home. When students in our CRPCM course were being racist, she addressed them so I wouldn’t have to. In so doing, she used her privilege (tangible & intangible) to my advantage as a person from a marginalized community.

I was in crisis and Katie created space for me to navigate that human experience in private while still maintaining professionalism in public. Black women don’t have the luxury of being both professional and human, but Katie’s allyship allowed me to find balance. She treated me as one would any White colleague experiencing trauma. I could drop the ball, take a break, cry, be angry, or experience the trauma in all sorts of manners without my intellectual capacity being questioned. In essence, I could show up with the complexity of my humanity.

This is not to suggest that Katie’s allyship is perfect or without burden to folks of color. While I was thankful that Katie didn’t use me to validate her “wokeness” or demonstrate how superior and different she was to known White supremacists, she still fumbled. Navigating one’s White privilege and White fragility in a culture of White supremacy is purposefully exigent. I vividly remember the disappointment I felt when Katie went on social media advertising her plans to attend a Black Lives Matter rally and asked her friends for ideas of what to put on her sign. That allyship was performative and counter to the apprenticeship work we’d been doing because her declaration centered herself rather than the marginalized. Still, what motivated me was her commitment to growth and the space she helped cultivate between us that I could address the issue in real time. Immediately, she owned the indiscretion, reaffirmed her commitment to social justice, and we were able to move forward. Missteps occur when we’re growing, but our accountability and humility in response to those experiences can make the difference in establishing trust

with vulnerable groups. I approached Katie's performative allyship from the perspective of a colleague with expertise in the matter, not a personal friend who has the advantage of rapport, because she was still being mentored. She responded accordingly. When we talk about allyship, if it requires friendship or charity for a privileged person to be held accountable, supportive, or to remain committed, then it isn't an allyship.

From the many calls to co-process how to interpret the replies from our colleagues to our scheduled zoom meetings to co-process how we would modify the CRPCM course or address students, at each step of the way we were deliberate and intentional in how we engaged or chose not to engage. This iteration of our strategic allyship lasted from the initial email I sent on June 12, 2020 and culminated at our college wide panel discussion on Allyship and Advocacy on September 10, 2020. There, Katie and I exposed our co-conspiracy and distinguished it from friendship and charity. We made explicit our intentionality—both in amplifying my voice and minimizing the presence of hers. We shared how Katie, throughout the process of humanizing me, owned her mistakes, maintained a professional rapport and leveraged her privilege to support me navigating my activism, teaching, and basic survival. At that panel, and also here, we tried to demonstrate the radical potentials of humanizing Others (Said, 1978) without having to personally be connected to marginalized communities or benefit from that humanization. When I say Katie treated me White, I am saying that she treated me like a human—which is what all communities, especially the marginalized, deserve and are demanding when we proclaim Black Lives Matter

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Author Bio

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