

## Navigating Resistance: Exploring Our Theoretical Foundations

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Under the title, “I Object,” students in our Winter 2018 class developed creative projects that explored the theme of objectification. As they exposed the realities of sweatshops, imagined creative ways to make statements about the over-sexualization of women in the media, and provided a look at inter-racial, aging and queer couples in their intimate lives, they also became familiar with the practice of nonviolence. Many conveyed their pride in being able to express discontent over an injustice they perceived, and, in so doing, gained the critical perspective they needed to ground their projects in a concept of resistance that went beyond a surface understanding. Collectively, they began to experience the potential for nonviolence to change the culture around them.



Group photo at the “I Object” exhibit presented by the Winter 2018 class

### Our Pedagogy

The Resist Violence pedagogy offers an integrative educational approach to respond to the violence in our communities. Its origin lies in a [Learning Communities](#) collaboration between a Humanities teacher, who for many years has explored the issues of violence, war and peace with her students, and a Cinema-Communications teacher and community activist. With their respective backgrounds, the choice to emphasize critical thinking, media literacy and creative expression was fitting.

In terms of educational theory, our pedagogy reaches the whole student cognitively, emotionally, and creatively, incorporating new insights from neuroscience, particularly the work of Mary Helen Immordino-Yang on embodied brains and social minds (2011, 2014). As psychological work on cognitive biases reveals, students need to be motivated to reflect on their ideas and behaviour; consequently, exploring the roots causes of the violence being studied, the suffering inflicted, and the potential for change are important. With ideas grounded in a particular “causal relationship” being most resistant to change, critical thinking is a necessary component to our pedagogy (Slusher and Anderson, 1996).



Building on this critical inquiry, the media literacy component encourages students not only to examine the sociocultural world they inhabit with new eyes, but also consider how their own ideas about violence were shaped or even manipulated. Finally, with the creative expression component, students develop their own ways to subvert the cultural messages that surround them, potentially creating new self-identities as creators of culture, rather than passive consumers.

*Designed by Tristan Lauzon and Téa Castrataro, 2016*

Initially, we viewed the focus on *resisting violence* as a means to minimize the extent to which our students might be overwhelmed by the material, and to deepen their critique of violence. However, as we explored

the connections between art and activism, and the multiple entry points this approach provided, we saw our students becoming more meaningfully aware of the violence in their real and virtual lives. With this realization, the potential impact of adopting a pedagogy that actively embraced *nonviolence* became apparent.

### Beyond Resistance: Lessons from Social Psychology

Today's increasingly polarized culture is affecting the classroom, making it more difficult to address complex social issues, particularly those around gender, race, and violence. There is the risk that raising provocative issues will result in angry exchanges among students, and decades of research on how resistant we are to challenges to deeply-rooted ideas and values might make one wonder whether they should even bother. Despite our society's significantly reduced approval for explicit racist and sexist beliefs, harmful stereotypes, or implicit biases, continue – often *unconsciously* – to shape much of our behaviour, particularly when we make quick decisions.

A recent meta-analysis of 573 experiments on implicit bias concluded that, while some studies reported changes in measures of implicit bias, very few tested these effects over time to assess their capacity to shift *behaviour*; and found that no strong evidence for such an impact existed (Forscher, et al. 2017, 2018). Moreover, the authors contend that any reductions in implicit bias, achieved by a short-term intervention, would likely be erased when individuals were reintroduced to the cultural environment which supports them. This has led some to argue that psychological research and practice should not be focused so much on “changing individual hearts and minds [but rather on] changing the sociocultural worlds in which those hearts and minds are immersed” (Adams, et al. 2008: 236). This standpoint moves beyond the borders of psychology into the realms of activism and social change theory, pointing to the value of an engaged pedagogy that integrates critical thinking on deeply-rooted social problems with the development of media literacy and creative expression skills.

Patricia Devine, the psychologist who thirty years ago first defended the idea that people could be unconscious racists, is also calling for a new direction in this field. Skeptical of the significance of interventions that seek to directly change implicit, or unintentional biases as she refers to them now, she is calling for us to think of them as an unwanted habit “that can be broken through a combination of motivation, awareness and effort” (Forscher, et al. 2017: 133). Unlike previous research experiments, her recent interventions have focused on bringing about long-term changes in individual awareness and behavior, and the results are promising. In one version, participants were more likely than control subjects to publicly object two years later to an essay that argued that stereotypes were useful. The methodology seeks to commit individuals to breaking their habits by teaching about how we can unintentionally discriminate, the resulting societal consequences, and methods to employ that can reduce our biases, such as perspective taking, individuation, and imaging that challenges stereotypes. According to the researchers, the key factors changing behavior seems to be an increase in the participant's noticing of biased behaviors, particularly in others, and in an increased belief that this is wrong (Forscher, et al. 2017).

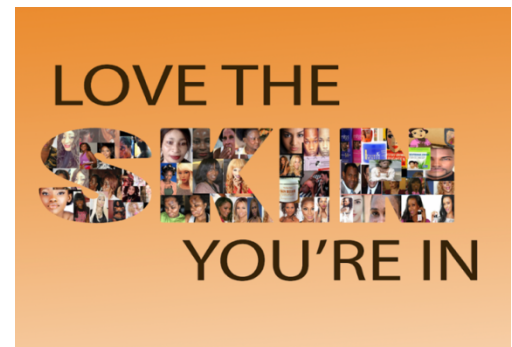
The focus on individual beliefs is significant, and for Devine and Forscher, connects to social psychologist Milton Rokeach's influential work in the 1970s. Rokeach argued that our sense of self identity was made up of layers, with some layers being more central to our self-concept than others. Changing the higher levels, which included one's values, is most threatening and faces the greatest resistance, as it necessarily requires a reshuffling of all the lower levels. Success in changing beliefs, or knowledge, which is what Devine and Forscher are aiming at, is referred to as the “sweet spot.” Efforts at making such changes are not perceived as so threatening to one's self-concept and thus easier to do, but they are high enough in

the layers that changes will bring about “a torrent of other changes” (Nordell 2017). In contrast, stereotypic associations are more on the bottom and are highly susceptible to environmental influence, something which explains the extent to which single interventions can bring changes to implicit bias measures but seem to have little impact on behaviour. Finally, researchers suggest that changing processes central to the self may be necessary to produce enduring change but may need to be supported by new patterns of behaviour. (Forscher, et al. 2017).

This focus on beliefs is central to the Resist Violence pedagogy. The critical thinking competency puts the focus on the widely-held ideas that continue to legitimize violence, such as the various “myths” that render certain forms of violence acceptable and the idea that in protracted social conflicts there is often no real alternative to the use of violence. Our acceptance of violence in our virtual and real lives is also contingent on it being represented in ways that shut down our empathy and sense of horror. Thus, greater awareness about the devastating consequences of violence and the implicit visual language by which violence is rendered acceptable or even fun in many cultures (which is explored through the media literacy competency by making and exploring various media techniques) can have a profound impact, perhaps not only shifting our ideas, but also our sense of what is right. Meanwhile, as students use art to resist the violence that impacts their lives, they are potentially acquiring, to use Forscher’s term, new “habits”. This remains to be proven, but our experiences with this pedagogy thus far suggests that its active embrace of nonviolence affects many students deeply.

### The Transformative Potential of Nonviolence

As teachers, we practise nonviolence when we work to create spaces based on mutual respect, equality, and trust. Genuine dialogue cannot take place when we react with anger or humiliate others. Calling someone “racist,” “sexist,” or even “privileged” will most likely be counterproductive and increase tensions in the classroom. Indeed, psychology provides much support for the positive effects that even a small generous gesture can have in a conflictual situation. A remark or question that causes an adversary to think of themselves positively can reduce the intensity of a difficult situation, leading to a greater willingness to make compromises in negotiations or an increased openness to a stigmatized “other” (Cohen and Sherman: 352-353).



*“Love the Skin You’re In” by Mya Alexis-John, 2017*

In one wonderful experiment in 2015 five hundred people were canvassed door to door about their attitudes toward trans issues. After a short 10-minute conversation, the experiment had a significant effect on reducing negative attitudes for at least three months. What was significant is that the canvassers used an approach that involved analogic perspective taking, where the people who were canvassed were given as much time as they wanted to explain their perspective and asked to discuss an experience where they had been perceived as different and treated unfairly (Broockman and Kalla 2016). In and out of the classroom, small gestures that value the other person make a difference.

What makes nonviolent activism inspiring, yet appear so impractical to many of us, is the extent to which its proponents ask us to distinguish the individual from their actions, even when confronted with their hatred and contempt. For Gandhi, the oppressor had to be persuaded, not coerced, to see the humanity of the “other.” This could only happen if the oppressed was able to demonstrate the truth of their

convictions while treating their opponent as an equal or even a friend. Much can be learned from this view of humanity.

As Gandhi argued, appeals to reason have their role, but “arguments become *disqualified* when the people making them are not perceived to be worth listening to” (Vinthagen 2015: 209), thus significant efforts are needed to move the other emotionally. The work of sociologist Stellen Vinthagen expands our understanding of how nonviolent movements work, revealing the much more subtle dynamics that are at play beyond the very visible confrontational strategies that seek to disrupt the status quo, and it is these subtleties that can arguably be brought into the classroom. Luckily, there are examples of this all around us as we begin to explore artistic activism.

The ability of artistic activism to surprise us – to show up in unlikely places (e.g. not a gallery) or take on unfamiliar forms (e.g. not a protest march) provides an opportunity to disrupt peoples’ preconceived notions of art and protest, and their predetermined ideas about the messages we are trying to communicate. Artistic activism creates an opportunity to bypass seemingly fixed political ideas and moral ideals and remap cognitive patterns. Surprise is a moment when hearts can be touched and minds reached, and both changed. (“Why Artistic Activism?”)

While Gandhi viewed voluntary self-suffering as central to breaking through the emotional and cognitive barriers to see the humanity of the “other,” Vinthagen argues that it is not the suffering per se that is central, but rather one’s willingness to put oneself at some risk. Given human resistance to recognizing that our own complicity sustains injustice, the transformative potential of nonviolent action is enhanced when it expresses an appealing “utopian enactment,” as demonstrated by the sit-ins and wade-ins of the Civil Rights Movement.

With nine other blacks, Gilbert Mason went to Biloxi Beach, a forbidden part of the enormous coastline [in Mississippi]. There is a double dynamic when a black nonviolent activist is punished for having gone into a ‘whites-only’ beach, happily singing, wearing a swimming costume, carrying a packed lunch and accompanied by family and friends: the act is both risk-filled and utopian. When the activists are manhandled and put in jail, the brutality of those in power is exposed at the same time as the activists’ good intentions are made clear. Not only are the civil rights champions imprisoned, they are imprisoned because they tried to socialize with people of another skin colour on the beach on a nice, warm summer’s day. (Vinthagen 2015: 220-221)

These types of actions – at once without, against and beyond violence – are, in essence, works of performance art that push more and more of us to take sides. As Vinthagen puts it, “Oppression becomes all the more grotesque and the vision of community all the more appealing when violence is exercised against constructive nonviolent activists who neither defend themselves (with violence) nor give up” (221). Although we clearly never ask students to take extreme risks, we do ask them to study the ways in which nonviolence works, and its ability to evolve and surprise in the face of violence provides great inspiration.

Central to bringing change is the recognition that nonviolent activists are proposing a better future, one encompassing greater equality, freedom and mutual respect (218); a vision appealing to most of us, but one that cannot be attained “as long as there are threatening people” (219). The challenge for nonviolent movements is to make this aspiration recognizable to society. The more this happens, the more likely violent responses and the status quo are seen as illegitimate. As demonstrated, successful social movements often turn to art, using stories and music, powerful symbolism and images, or dramatic performances to unexpectedly capture our attention or activate our empathy. From our recent experience, it turns out the classroom is a great place to explore and participate in this.

### What Are the Implications for the Classroom?

As educators, we rarely have to confront the fear and dehumanization that exists in deeply embedded systems of injustice, but we do face discriminatory attitudes, harmful ideologies and often simply indifference. As we have explored, none of us is as open to new ideas as we like to think. Being confronted by knowledge that challenges our world view is threatening, and we often respond with defensiveness and denial to protect our self-identity. The need to ensure the integrity of our sense of self is so strong that even mundane events can trigger defensive mechanisms (Cohen and Sherman 2014: 335).

Our capacity to avoid and evade uncomfortable realities is complex and little understood, despite its significance in shaping our responses to violence against ourselves, others and nature. Forms of denial influence our individual lives, as well as the larger culture and political world we inhabit. In *States of Denial*, sociologist Stanley Cohen identifies three possibilities with regards to “*what exactly is being ‘denied’*”: the facts themselves, the full significance of what happened (as in “It wasn’t rape.”), and/or a denial or minimization of the psychological, political or moral implications that should follow (2001: 7-8). Cohen emphasizes the ordinariness of denial, arguing that the interesting question is “not ‘why do we shut out?’ but ‘why do we ever not shut out?’” (249). As educators, we rarely start from this premise, assuming instead that the climate change denier or student who ignores the harm done by racism or sexism is simply uninformed; they are problematic exceptions easily addressed by us giving them the “facts.” If, however, we shift the problem as Cohen does, and assume its prevalence in our classroom, we are called upon to ask more questions of our pedagogical approaches and their capacity to create the openings needed where new information, much of it disturbing, can be acknowledged.



*"Would you call Venus a slut?" by Aislinn Beattie, 2017*

The transformative capacity of nonviolence is subtle. Although this contributes to the tendency to link nonviolence to passivity, its subtlety is actually a strength: we are affected before our resistance can be activated. We need to think more about how we can bring the element of surprise into the classroom. Finding more ways to incorporate art, story-telling, and inspiring examples of nonviolent activism into academic discussions is a start. Rather than begin with explicit discussions about social privilege, for example, we need to think more about how we can move students to unexpectedly recognize their own group’s advantages. With the Resist Violence pedagogy, we are using the insights of nonviolence theory and practice, but also re-shaping the classroom environment by building social activism directly into the course. By engaging in artistic activism, students are able to think of themselves as not merely consumers of culture, but as agents of change. This is an empowering identity, but also one that brings responsibility, as it reveals a more sophisticated understanding of social power. Our students discover that power is not simply exerted from the top down, but continuously being

reproduced in our everyday habits, through our beliefs, feelings and actions. Although difficult - as it involves us making the unconscious conscious - resistance becomes possible, and as students become more aware of this, it makes their choices in life more meaningful.

Activism seems too daunting to many of us, and perhaps too political for the classroom, but connecting it to art makes it accessible. It is a perfect vehicle for students to reveal how violence has affected their lives, to display the humanity of the "other," and to create a vision for a better future. As students reflect on what is meaningful to them, they frequently respond unexpectedly to what is meaningful to others. And, as much as the committed activist's willingness to put themselves at risk can move us, this powerful element of vulnerability is also inherent to the creative process. Hopefully beliefs shift, but even more significantly, new habits and self-identities may be developing as students engage with the sociocultural world that shapes them.

...Thank you for helping me heal. Now I understand how violence works and it helped me be less ashamed as a result of my experience with it. I think the course also taught me how to bring change to the world, and I am happy to know that some teachers are committed to helping students deconstruct harmful ideas.

Student, Winter 2018

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