

# Trans Liberation in Graduate Education: Reflections on a Project Centering Trans Collegians

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## ***Abstract***

*The purpose of this article is to reflect on our collective experiences as students and faculty in a higher education and student affairs (HESA) graduate course that worked to center trans collegians and provide recommendations to promote opportunities for trans liberation in the classroom. Dr. Jason Garvey teaches The American College Student, a HESA course exploring the diversity of American college students and institutions. The course is framed around the concepts of Knowing (gaining knowledge and understanding), Being (clarifying values and beliefs), and Doing (developing skills). Each semester, he selects a specific population of students to contextualize college impact and success theories learned in class and supplement students' learning of broader bodies of theory and scholarship. In spring 2018, Dr. Jason Garvey and his students supplemented their learning about college impact with a focus on the experiences of trans collegians. As a part of the Doing component, Dr. Jason Garvey structured an assignment called the Doing Project with the goal of developing a self-sustaining initiative to serve trans collegians. In this manuscript, we will share our experiences as students and faculty throughout the Doing Project as we reflected upon the question, "How does the Doing Project lead to trans liberation in the classroom?"*

**Keywords:** trans liberation, graduate education, classroom, reflection, trans collegians, project

## **Introduction**

*The American College Student (ACS)* is a graduate-level course that explores the diversity of American college students and institutions. The course is organized around Astin's (1993) *Inputs-Environments-Outputs* framework. Specifically, for this course, inputs include student demographics, the college choice process, and enrollment. Transitions, college environments, and college student development create the focus for the study of environments. Finally, retention and persistence, student outcomes, and moving forward make up our examination of outputs. ACS is a required course for MEd students enrolled in the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) graduate preparatory program. In addition, there are typically 5-10 graduate students in ACS who are enrolled in other graduate programs or registered as non-degree-seeking students.

ACS is framed around the concepts of *Knowing* (gaining knowledge and understanding), *Being* (clarifying values and beliefs), and *Doing* (developing skills). As such, there are three objectives for this course, each with accompanying outcomes. Regarding *Knowing*, students are expected to be able to describe the diversity of students attending two- and four-year institutions, identify characteristics of learning environments that support student success, and explain various

student outcomes that higher education institutions should demonstrate to various stakeholders. Regarding *Being*, students are expected to discuss current trends and assumptions about college students, environments, and outcomes, and examine individual contributions to higher education. Finally, *Doing* focuses on developing skills and requires that students examine local/regional/national contexts for a particular population of students, and create a self-sustaining initiative that will serve this student population.

Each semester that ACS is taught, the class focuses on a specific population of students to contextualize theories learned in class and supplement the learning of broader bodies of college impact theory and scholarship. The professor selects the population based on current contexts in higher education and student affairs, and also on newly released book publications that are highly regarded in the field. In spring 2018, ACS supplemented learning about college impact with a focus on the experiences of transgender<sup>1</sup> students and read Dr. Z Nicolazzo's (2016) book entitled *Trans\* in College: Transgender students' strategies for navigating campus life and the institutional policies of inclusion*.

The purpose of the Doing Project in spring 2018 was the development a self-sustaining initiative to serve trans collegians. In order to progress in the Doing Project throughout the semester, there were several assignments for accountability.

- **Defining aspects:** Who is our base/community with whom we work? Who are the stakeholders and decision-makers? With which departments/affiliates should we connect? What are we trying to achieve? What is your intention for this initiative, and how does it relate to your own gender journey?
- **Planning and preparation:** Draft a timeline for the semester, including specific steps for the initiative and important semester dates. Suggest mechanisms for communication and accountability. What resources will we need for the initiative?
- **Implementation:** Determine deliverables for the initiative. Draft committee structures, including goals and tasks for each committee.
- **Finishing up:** Determine what must be completed for finishing the initiative. What obstacles are in our way? What is your individual role for finishing up the initiative? Has your relationship with gender evolved from participating in this initiative? Why or why not?

In order to frame the context of our experiences as students and faculty in ACS and the classroom broadly, we provide literature that overviews trans students in the classroom. In our review, we pay particular attention to uplifting the voices of transgender scholars and scholars who have fluid and complex understandings of gender and trans people.

### Trans Students in the Classroom

In 2014, Laverne Cox graced the cover of Time magazine and boldly declared to the world that the transgender tipping point - the height of transgender representation and advocacy - had arrived (Steinmetz, 2014). Trans folks have been woven into the modern fabric of society; since the Coopers Do-Nuts Riot of 1959, Stonewall in 1969, and a recent series of landmark gender-affirming cases from county judges to the Supreme Court, transgender people have been fighting

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1. The authors use "transgender" and "trans" interchangeably and as inclusive umbrella terms as we embrace the queerness of language used to describe the multitude of gender identities and expressions.

for recognition and equality under the law. However, the Trump administration has taken several steps to dehumanize the trans community and strip away hard-earned rights, including attempting to ban trans soldiers from serving in the military, defining gender as a biological construct, and rescinding the Obama administration's Dear Colleague letter regarding schools' duty to protect and accommodate trans students (Benner & Pear, 2018; Kreighbaum, 2018).

Within higher education, trans oppression appears for many in the classroom. Since the rescinding of the "Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students," there are no federal protections for trans students. The landscape is dire: nearly one-quarter (24%) of college students who were out or perceived as transgender in college or vocational school experienced "some form of mistreatment, such as being verbally harassed, prohibited from dressing according to their gender identity, disciplined more harshly, or physically or sexually assaulted because people thought they were transgender" (Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafi, 2016, p. 1). Trans students face unique barriers to inclusion compared with their lesbian, gay, and bisexual peers, and scholars continue to contest the conflation of the experiences of minoritized gender identities with minoritized sexual identities (Catalano, 2015). On college campuses, transgender students are often facing issues of misrecognition and invisibility (Pusch, 2005) in addition to more extreme mistreatment based on their identities. Micro- and macro-aggressions occur inside and outside of the classroom, with harm being inflicted by peers, professors, and professionals who misgender, invalidate, or harass students. How do we expect students to thrive in college when they are barely able to survive? Campus climate directly impacts academic experiences and outcomes (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2014).

Institutions of higher education, often viewed as bastions of radical inclusion, seem to be failing trans students. However, Catalano (2015) summarized that higher education, which has previously "been characterized by genderism," is at present in the process of being "transformed by the presence of trans students" (p. 411). Though Jourian (2017) argued that some current practices "distill complex data and people into simplistic models and understandings" (p. 415), there are still broad strokes colleges and universities can take to ensure the legal protection of trans students on campus in the face of lacking federal protections. The Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals Trans Policy Working Group (2014) created *Suggested Best Practices for Supporting Trans Students*, offering recommendations to campuses related to housing, health centers, campus conduct offices, and more. In 2017, two Consortium co-chairs, Genny Bee-myn and D. A. Dirks, authored an additional piece after the Dear Colleague letter was nullified, encouraging campuses to legally encode trans students' rights in their own policies.

Simply having transgender people represented in the public sphere or working in higher education does not signal their human rights or equal protection under the law. As Kai Cheng Thom (2018) wrote, "We must remember that representation and revolution are not at all the same thing" (para. 41). Clearly then, representation is not enough; liberation is what trans folks are actively working toward in this revolution. Liberation is both, "The action of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression" and "freedom from limits on thought or behavior" ("Liberation," n.d. para. 1 & para. 2). Daman Wandke (2018) believes that liberation is two-fold. One form of liberation comes "when a person or group who is stereotyped chooses to overcome the labels set upon them by individuals or society as a whole, and therefore finds liberation within them self," (Wandke, 2018, para. 1) while another comes "when an individual or society that places labels on others takes the time to look inside the labeled person or group rather than simply seeing the outside; and thus, become liberated in knowledge" (para. 1).

ACS attempted to enact liberation both for trans students, allowing them to self-define their educational goals and engage with theoretical content related to their lived experiences, and for cisgender students, challenging them to see trans students and colleagues through a frame of liberation. What then does liberation look like in a classroom through a trans epistemology?

### **Liberation Inside Classrooms through a Trans Epistemology**

Nicolazzo (2017) proposed a trans epistemology as a way towards trans liberation in the classroom. Postsecondary institutions of education produce knowledge that others trans people, bodies, and experiences (Catalano, 2015) by attempting to understand trans people through a gazing cisgender eye. To counteract the cisgender lens, Nicolazzo (2017) proposes a trans epistemology, “an epistemology from which we come to know ourselves, each other, and, as a result, can transform the narratives that have been written about us by cisgender others” (p. 4) - an epistemology rooted in knowing about transness through the experiences of trans people. Nicolazzo (2017) proposed trans epistemology which includes six tenets rooted in community-based praxis and living towards trans liberation. The following are the descriptions of each tenant:

1. Trans people may be from oppression, but we ourselves are not of oppression;
2. We all experience our transness differently as a result of our varied, intersecting identities;
3. In and through community with each other, we have the power to heal and remake ourselves as trans people;
4. Our continued de/re/construction of our trans subjectivities spans material and virtual environments;
5. “Trickle up activism” and grassroots coalition-building are, and will remain to be, orientations for our community;
6. In/visibility and its varied meanings are central to our senses of self, community, and kinship. (Nicolazzo, 2017, pp. 7-8)

For our manuscript, we used Nicolazzo’s (2017) trans epistemology to understand how the Doing Project tried to serve trans collegians. We acknowledge that there is not a single trans epistemology but many trans epistemologies because each individual and their intersecting identities experience being trans differently. As such, in our manuscript, we foreground individual narratives of all four co-authors reflecting on their experience to understand the manifestation and oppression of trans liberation in the Doing Project.

### **Our Trans Epistemologies**

Each author’s analysis of the manifestations and oppression of trans liberation in the Doing Project is informed by their varied, intersecting identities, thus each author provides a description of how they identify. Jeane (any pronoun) identifies as a Filipinx genderqueer transmasculine person who had not medically transitioned at the time. Ben (he/him) identifies as a white queer transgender man. Soren (he/him) identifies as a white queer butch transgender man. Jay (he/him) identifies as a white gay/queer cisgender man. There is no single trans epistemology, and each author embodies their own version of a trans epistemology based on their varied, intersecting identities, especially gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, and race. Though each author holds

their individual identities, whiteness and masculinity are enforced heavily by three of the four authors. By acknowledging the identities present, the authors acknowledge the privilege and oppression which informs how each answers the question, “How does the Doing Project lead to trans liberation in the classroom?”

### **Our Stories through a Collaborative Autoethnography**

We used the Doing Project from the ACS to explore our learning experiences as queer and trans people in higher education. To reflect on our learning experience, the authors used a collaborative autoethnography to center community-interrogation in a shared learning environment - in this case, a graduate classroom. An autoethnography incorporates “emotion, action, introspection, self-consciousness, and the body itself” (Martinez & Andreatta, 2015, p. 228) to interrogate individual narratives within a larger context (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In other words, an autoethnography allows authors to intentionally reflect on their identities within the context of their research (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Glesne, 2011). A collaborative autoethnography uses the same analysis but does so through a collective lens of a community. Using a collaborative autoethnography creates separate and complementary narratives for students in a shared learning space (Blalock & Akehi, 2018). Our collaborative autoethnography allowed us to bring both our individual experiences, shaped by each person’s intersecting identities, and our shared experiences through the affinity we shared as queer and trans people.

This article is the result of individual and community reflection through reading, writing, and talking. To capture our experiences, we kept a shared journal during the semester and created questions to reflect on our overall experience and individually answered them. Below are the questions:

- Why did you take/teach this class?
- What happened during the class?
- How did your relationships evolve or change in the class?
- How did your relationship with gender evolve or change because of the class?
- How are you feeling since you took the class?

In the following subsections, each author provides context for the reason behind taking or teaching ACS. Then we give an overview of class dynamics through four themes which influenced the way we navigated the class: outness, tokenization, kinship, and processing gender identity. Individual reflections will be used to showcase each author’s voice through the text. We used our collaborative autoethnography to understand how trans liberation manifested or not in our classroom, the ACS.

### **What it means to take *The American College Student***

Each author had their own expectations for the class based on their perceptions of how trans students were going to be centered in the classroom.

*Jay—Each semester that I teach ACS, I select a specific population of students to contextualize theories learned in class and supplement our learning of broader bodies of college impact theory and scholarship. The population I select is based on current contexts*

*in higher education and student affairs, and also on newly released book publications that are highly regarded in the field. In spring 2018, we supplemented our learning about college impact with a focus on the experiences of trans collegians and will read Dr. Z Nicolazzo's book entitled Trans\* in college: Transgender students' strategies for navigating campus life and the institutional policies of inclusion.*

As the professor, Jay crafted a structure for his students to understand the impact of college on trans students through reading scholarship. He had hoped that by reading about trans students, his students would learn the ways they can support trans students in college as student affairs professionals. Before the Doing Project, Jay assigned students to read a *Trans\* in College* and other supplemental articles to give context to what trans students face in college

*Ben—I took this course because I was excited to have the opportunity to engage with trans-specific higher education content. I had never had a course explicitly center transness, and this is exactly what I was looking for in a course description. I also wanted to develop kinship with Jay, challenge myself, and explore an elective. I hoped to have the chance to focus on centering my identity in my work and not needing to find an excuse to do so.*

*Jeane—When Jay announced that the class would center trans students I grew excited and scared at the same time because I recently came out to my cohort as trans. I felt excited to center trans students in our readings, discussions, and class projects because I wanted to see myself represented and also feel supported by my cohort. What stirred my nervousness were peoples' expectations of me, a trans person, within a class centering trans students.*

*Soren—I was excited to take it because Jay was the professor, but when I heard that the focus of the class was trans students, I felt apprehensive. I started thinking and accepting myself as trans during January 2018, and the course started at the end of that month. There was very little time for me to process my identity internally before I had to start processing it externally and critically.*

Jeane, Ben, and Soren were hyper-aware of their gender identities and gender expressions because of the way Jay structured the ACS to center their salient identity as trans students. Ben was excited to see himself represented in the class material, especially within higher education as a trans student affairs professional. Jeane and Soren also felt excited, but recently coming out as trans stirred anxiousness because they feared their trans identity would be interrogated as they were processing what being trans meant for them. Overall, each trans author felt a sense of excitement taking ACS because they felt they would be represented in the material and supported by Jay. Since the three trans authors had never had their trans identity at the center of their classroom experiences, mixed in with their excitement of representation was apprehension of how other students in the course would interrogate their identities. Before the Doing Project, Jeane, Ben, and Soren understood that Jay would magnify their trans identities through the lens of representation and their classmates would do the same through the lens of tokenization.

## Outness

Each trans author's level of outness contributed to the ways in which they interacted with class material, people taking the class, and Jay. Before the start of the class, Jay invited anyone who identified as trans to connect with him in hopes to provide a structure of support.

*Jay—When I began the class, I reached out to folks who I knew identified as trans/non-binary. I also sent a broad message to all members of the class inviting them to contact me if they identified as trans/non-binary, particularly because of the focus of class, and because I did not provide effective support in previous iterations of this class for students who identified with the student group of focus. I wanted to make sure trans/non-binary students were feeling supported from the beginning of class.*

Jay wanted to foster kinship with the trans students in class as a cisgender ally facilitating the classroom space. He invited Jeane and Ben because he knew they identified as trans, and they both came to process with Jay about how they felt about taking the class.

*Jeane—Ben came to the meeting, and I felt seen and supported by both folks because they listened to my feelings and ideas for the class. After our meeting, I felt excited about the class because I felt like I was able to structure the class in a way I felt comfortable, and I also felt like I had folks to go to.*

Jeane came out as trans to their HESA program during the end of the first semester, and they decided to come to the meeting because of their positive relationship with Jay. They feared not being seen as a trans “enough” because they had not yet transitioned physically, and they did not know how to explain their gender identity through words. Jeane understood that being out as trans comes with the risk of having to prove one's transness to cisgender folks. During the meeting, Jeane felt affirmed by both Ben and Jay, which eased their nervousness.

*Soren—I only recently started identifying as non-binary during the month of January. Holding this identity is really new and fragile for me, and I don't know what that means for me a lot of the time. This class comes at a strange time then. How do I exist in a class that centers trans students when that identity is so new to me? What is my place in this narrative?*

Both Jeane and Soren recently came out as trans, but their experiences varied from voluntarily coming out versus feeling forced to come out. Jay's invitation to meet with trans folks, though filled with positive intent, Soren felt pressured to come out. Soren did not come out because he feared the environment would question his trans identity when he was still questioning what it meant for him. For both Jeane and Soren, outness came with the risk of being interrogated as a trans person in a classroom intentionally focused on the concept of trans students.

Ben identifies as a trans man and holds “cis-passing” privilege, allowing him to choose if and when to come out to the class.

*Ben—I intentionally did not come out during the first class, and took note of how folks interacted with me/listened to what I had to share/etc. Halfway through our next class*

*I decided to come out, and I noticed the nuanced ways in which those interactions/attitudes/etc. shifted. Someone continuously challenged every single thing I shared about my story and the dynamics on campus for trans students, despite having been a trans person at this school for the past five years (it was their first semester). Don't get me wrong, I appreciate being challenged to think about problems in new ways, but every time this happens in this particular class it seems to be directly related to me sharing my experience as a trans person.*

After Ben came out as a trans, folks began to challenge his input and perspectives when he talked about his trans identity. Like Jeane and Soren, Ben understood that coming out is risk in a classroom where trans students are invalidated based on cisgender students' perception of what trans students are supposed to be or need.

Outness was tied to Jeane, Ben, and Soren's perception of safety which in turn influenced the way they showed up as a trans person in class. Initially, Jeane and Ben saw the class as a way to engage with their trans identity, so visibility meant representation. On the other hand, Soren saw visibility as a threat towards his identity development because he did not want others to question his newly formed trans identity. Each trans author's sense of self was at risk of challenge by cisgender students' perception of transness based on their in/visibility.

Jeane and Ben's outness was used against them because cisgender students questioned their ability to speak for the trans community, as cisgender students tried to discern what initiatives to create for the Doing Project. Soren not being out was used as a defense mechanism against the tokenization Jeane and Ben were facing, in addition to silencing their input as a trans person towards trans initiatives. Outness was used to tokenize and silence Jeane, Ben, and Soren during the Doing Project.

## **Kinship**

Jeane, Ben, and Soren formed a kinship, or a relationship built on shared identity, with one another to process their shared struggles because trans people in and through community with each other have the power to heal and remake themselves as trans people (Nicolazzo, 2017).

*Soren—The person I felt consistent kinship with, throughout the entire semester and Doing Project, was Jeane. During the first few weeks of the class in particular, I saw a lot of harm and tokenism (accidental I think) directed towards them. They were the only out trans person in the class for most of the semester, and watching their experience solidified my conviction to stay in the closet. At the same time, we talked at length about the class and our experiences of the class as trans folx in different stages of our identity development.*

Soren could empathize with the harm Jeane was facing as another trans person regardless of being out. After each class, Jeane and Soren processed the ways they faced harm because they offered validation for each other. Unlike cisgender students who challenged both of their lived experiences, they understood the struggles of existing as a trans person holistically. Soren brought up feeling pressured to come into his own identity at a pace he was not comfortable with, and Jeane was challenged to prove themselves as a trans person.



*Ben—I didn't seek out relationships with the other trans folks in the class initially, but always felt in my heart that we were all there for each other... The way that my peers act in this class, both in general and in relation to conversations regarding transness, has made me consider withdrawing...I have been feeling guilty that I dropped the class and worried that I burned bridges or strained relationships by doing so. I generally feel awkward and either frustrated or embarrassed when I happen to run into someone from the class. I feel bad that I "left" some of my friends behind or let down Jay.*

Though Ben did not directly reach out to other trans folks in the classroom, he felt a sense of care for the other trans folk who he knew were also facing harm. Ben's frustration surrounding class dynamics built up to the point that he dropped the class for his own well-being. He understood that being there for each other is essential to healing, so he felt guilty for leaving.

Outside from their kinship with Ben and Soren, Jeane built relationships with cisgender folks who did not tokenize their trans identity.

*Jeane—Person-centered cis allies were folks who got to know me as Jeane and not just as a trans person. These folks did not change the way they acted around me because I was a trans person, but they validated my identity as a part of the whole me.*

Though they did not connect through their transness, person-centered cisgender allies validated the ways Jeane expressed their transness. In addition to validating their trans identity, person-centered allies understood that transness was a salient identity but not the only identity that Jeane holds.

Jay shared kinship with queer and trans students through their shared queer identity. He understood that his relationship with trans students was rooted in allyship as a cisgender gay/queer man.

*Jay—I Still a strong kinship, particularly with QT folks from class (and even more still with trans/non-binary students). I am more readily accepting my cycle of shame and finding ways to escape this cycle to move towards more effective allyship...I recognize that dwelling on my feelings of "I wish I could be a better trans/non-binary ally" places a lot of unnecessary educating and supporting from trans/non-binary people to help me get through my dwelling (which is wholly unnecessary).*

Compared to Jeane, Soren, and Ben's kinship, Jay's allyship as a cisgender ally and professor came with taking responsibility for the harm caused to the trans students as a result of participating in ACS.

For Soren, Ben, and Jeane, kinship with other trans folks was necessary to heal through their negative experiences in class. This kinship acted as a mode of survival because they were able to empathize and validate each other when their trans identities were interrogated or dehumanized. Outside of the trans kinship, queer kinship and person-centered allies became support systems for trans students, but these relationships also came with potential for unwanted processing of cisgender guilt. In and through community with one another and person-centered allies, trans students were able to find communities of support within the classroom.

Though the Doing project tokenized and silenced Soren, Ben, and Jeane, they built kinship through shared trauma. They used their kinship as a form of collective resilience against the trans

oppression present in the classroom. Soren, Ben, and Jeane built kinship as a form of survival in ACS - kinship was not a choice.

## **Processing Gender Identity**

As a result of the class, each author processed their gender identity, whether they wanted to or not, through the class material and interactions with people in class. Each person was able to sustain themselves through support systems or dropping the class because trans people may be from oppression, but they are not of oppression which means that though trans people face oppression they are able to exist and thrive (Nicolazzo, 2017). Soren, Ben, and Jeane share the ways in which they found ways to exist in a transphobic classroom space.

*Soren—My relationship with my gender definitely evolved during class. I was forced to think about and pick apart my identity faster than I wanted. I was forced to face uncomfortable class situations and discussions before I felt ‘ready’. I did a lot of unpacking and processing outside of class hours, I did a lot of processing and unpacking with Jeane on our way to and from class. My strong support network helped me work through my identity in a positive way even while I was having negative experiences in class.*

The focus on trans students in class felt like a constant interrogation of his gender identity which led him to seek refuge outside of class through his support systems. Soren understood that he needed to take this class for his graduate degree, so he had to find a way to survive the semester.

*Jeane—The class magnified my relationship with gender through the class content and my interactions with folks about gender. The readings validated my experiences as a trans person by hearing stories and research about what trans students were going through within higher education. Based on my relationship with folks in the class, I would either feel affirmed or a “population” to study which made me think about my gender identity constantly.*

Jeane found the focus on trans students as an affirming experience through representation when they were not tokenized. The readings provided Jeane with the vocabulary to express their gender identity in a way that they had never experienced before. Jeane also formed support systems through their trans kinship with Soren and person-centered allies who made them feel more than a learning tool.

*Ben—My relationship with my gender did not evolve or change as far as I have reflected, but the way I talk about it (or not) has shifted. I definitely don’t feel as willing to out myself anymore after the negative experiences in this class.*

Ben, who has been out for several years, felt that the class did not impact his gender identity development, but the negative interactions led him to close off his trans identity within the classroom. He chose to prioritize his well-being and withdrew from the class to avoid the transphobic environment.

Jeane, Soren, and Ben found ways to heal through the trans oppression they faced in the classroom. When viewed through the lens of oppression, dismissal or tokenization dehumanize

trans people. The three trans authors faced various forms of trans oppression because the Doing Project failed to acknowledge the tenets of Nicolazzo's (2017) trans epistemology as cisgender students tried to complete an assignment.

### The Doing Project as Liberatory Work

If trans liberation can be imagined through a trans epistemology (Nicolazzo, 2017), then liberatory work is possible through an embodiment of trans epistemology. Trans students embodied a trans epistemology, but the Doing Project did not provide cisgender students a framework to do liberatory work. In this case, the classroom space manifested the tokenization of the trans students in the room as seen through the individual narratives. Cisgender peers challenged the lived experiences of the trans people in the room but not the scholarship, which led to the erasure of the former. Trans people were dismissed in the place of scholarship as cisgender students worked to complete an assignment. The classroom was used as a place to complete an assignment about trans students, instead of making the classroom about trans students themselves. Table 1 below summarizes how the tenets of a trans epistemology manifested in the classroom between trans and cisgender students:

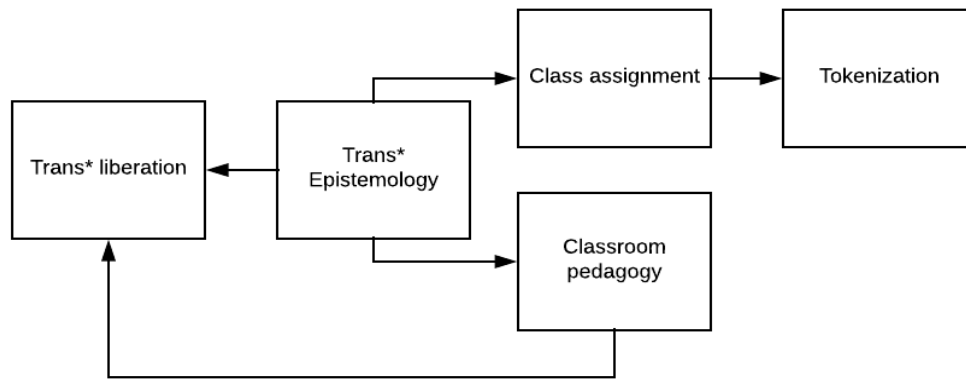
Nicolazzo's (2016) Tenets of a trans epistemology	How trans students embodied a trans epistemology	How the Doing Project did/did not embody a trans epistemology
Trans people may be from oppression, but we ourselves are not of oppression.	Jeane, Ben, and Soren found ways to survive and thrive inside and outside the classroom though they were facing hardships.	Cisgender students were tasked to create an initiative <i>for</i> trans students based on what they thought trans students needed instead of <i>with</i> trans students.
We all experience our transness differently as a result of our varied, intersecting identities.	Jeane, Ben, and Soren shared their lived experiences as trans individuals with intersecting identities.	Cisgender students were tasked to learn about transness through literature and challenged peers' lived experiences.
In and through community with each other, we have the power to heal and remake ourselves as trans people.	Jeane, Ben, and Soren used their kinship as a way to heal from the harm they faced as trans individuals.	Cisgender students were encouraged to consider their gender and privilege through class assignments and discussions, but their reflection was rooted in their own cisgender lens.

Our continued de/re/construction of our trans subjectivities spans material and virtual environments.	Jeane, Ben, and Soren used online journaling as a way to understand their experience in the classroom.	Cisgender students used online articles, websites, and social media as a way to understand trans students' experiences which they used to inform their initiatives.
"Trickle up activism" and grassroots coalition-building are, and will remain to be, orientations for our community.	Jeane, Ben, and Soren focused their projects on an initiative started by trans students years ago.	Cisgender students were given liberty to choose how to focus their time/attention. Some chose to partner with Jeane, Ben, and Soren, others chose to create their own initiative without trans people.
In/visibility and its varied meanings are central to our senses of self, community, and kinship.	Jeane, Ben, and Soren chose to come out or not based on their needs which influenced the ways in which they thought about themselves, community, and kinship.	Out trans students were asked to make decisions to facilitate learning in the class which led to added responsibility of teaching.

*Table 1.* Summary of the ways tenets of a trans epistemology showed up in the classroom for trans and cisgender students.

The Doing Project did not lead to trans liberation because the project did not have a lens that encompassed a trans epistemology. Cisgender students were tasked with creating an initiative based on what they learned from scholarly literature viewed through a cisgender lens. The focus on the Doing Project as an assignment led students to tokenize trans students as a source of validation for their grade. Cisgender students created initiatives based on what they thought trans students needed, instead of understanding what is necessary for trans liberation. A trans epistemology can be a framework for an assignment, but may lead to tokenization because of an assignment's ties to a grade. How do faculty and students shift from erasure and tokenization towards liberation? Classroom spaces can be a conduit to educate cisgender students about the tenets of a trans epistemology to work towards trans liberation in education. Trans liberation through the embodiment of a trans epistemology is possible through a classroom pedagogy rooted in a trans epistemology. In a liberatory classroom, trans students stories are validated not erased, initiatives against transphobia are led by trans and cisgender individuals, and cisgender privilege is acknowledged.

When we choose to do liberatory work through pedagogies instead of assignments we create an environment where trans students are not used as another "resource" to ensure a good grade. A classroom pedagogy rooted in a trans epistemology creates a structure where trans students are allowed to be their whole selves, and cisgender students share the responsibility of facilitating that space. When cisgender students understand the tenets of a trans epistemology they can engage with transness by interrogating their cisgender privilege and not challenge the narratives of trans students in the classroom.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual diagram of how trans liberation can manifest through a classroom pedagogy rooted in a trans epistemology.

The Doing Project did not lead to trans liberation for the trans students in the classroom because of trans student tokenization by cisgender students who were driven by grades to do liberatory work. Trans liberation in a classroom space is possible through a classroom pedagogy rooted in a trans epistemology where trans students can exist as themselves and cisgender students share the responsibility of creating a safe space. Trans oppression continues to erase trans bodies within the binary education system, and we can use a trans epistemology as a way to resist. As educators, we must use our classroom space as a place to start a revolution towards liberation for trans students which starts with a pedagogy rooted in the epistemologies of trans students.

### **A Call for Trans Liberation in Higher Education**

The following are recommendations for educators based on the tenets of trans epistemology. Recommendations draw on trans epistemology as a guide to try to create classroom spaces that center trans liberation.

1. Trans people may be from oppression, but we ourselves are not of oppression.

There is a fine line between doing “for” and doing “with.” Tokenization occurred in the Doing Project when students sought to create initiatives *for* instead of *with* trans students. The lives and experiences of trans students may have been overlooked in favor of a grade. When centering a group of students, especially marginalized students, remove the incentive of a grade. Grades perpetuate a system of competition, white academia, and take the humanness out of people. In the case of the Doing Project, trans people became a group to be studied and understood for knowledge. Without the focus on a grade, lived experience, true understanding, and kinship can thrive. Some ways to facilitate this in a classroom would be to encourage self-reflection in low-stakes assignments such as journals (which allows for individual processing and ensures that harm is not done to others while the professor can give individual feedback), and to acknowledge that harm will occur in any space where there is discussion of marginalized identities, not just trans identities. Teach students the skills to understand, accept, own, and process guilt.

2. We all experience our transness differently as a result of our varied, intersecting identities.

In the classroom, the trans authors of this piece felt like their transness was under constant scrutiny. They felt like they needed to be a source of trans knowledge, to help other students define and understand what trans meant. The other source of information on trans students were academic articles, many of which were written by queer and trans authors about their experiences. These sources of knowledge provided only a few accounts of what it meant to be trans, but those cases were taken as the entire and sole definition for transness. Cisgender students took their understanding of that single definition of trans identity and created Doing Projects around that idea. This allowed them to feel like experts on trans identity, challenge trans students, like Ben described, and erase the varied trans identities of students in the classroom.

Because there is no single trans experience it is important to expand materials on trans students and people beyond the people in the classroom and academic texts. Facilitate this by presenting scholarship that does not just fall in the realm of academic studies and peer reviewed journals. Use personal accounts and multimedia (i.e. Youtube videos or blogs) to display the breadth of trans narratives. Affirm narratives of students who haven't figured everything out, highlight the intersectional nature of identity. Exploring a trans identity is a process, and for many people it continues to be a process even after they claim a trans identity. Educators must work to help their students interpret class materials through a trans epistemological lens.

3. In and through community with each other, we have the power to heal and remake ourselves as trans people.

Community is essential for trans people when in cisgender spaces. In ACS, Jeane, Ben, and Soren sought community with each other to process and heal throughout the semester, and Soren and Jeane constructed their Doing Project around their shared community. However, community is not just beneficial for trans students to heal and be in kinship. Community for cisgender folks could serve as a venue for those folks to process privilege and exist in a space where they could understand and heal through guilt as a collective group. This might take the form of affinity groups, although affinity groups can isolate and out trans people who choose not to participate in the cisgender group. If those groups and opportunities to come together to process guilt are optional, then those who do not attend are not outed. There could be several affinity processing groups per semester with a requirement to attend at least one group. That way, folks would be in an affirming space but have the opportunity to choose when and with whom.

Beyond trans community amongst each other, Jeane, Ben, and Soren all expressed a connection to Jay, the instructor, as part of the reason they wanted or were excited to take this course. As students, Jeane, Ben, and Soren accessed Jay throughout the class, and he was seen as a supportive ally and in some cases a mentor, with whom they all feel kinship through a shared queer identity. Mentorship can be critical for students who come from underrepresented backgrounds in higher education settings (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Brunsma, Embrick, & Shin, 2017) For trans students, even just having a supportive professor who is open and affirming to their identities can make a big difference in their experience (Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Dickey, 2019; Pryor, 2015). Creating mentorship opportunities amongst trans faculty, professionals, and students would foster community beyond peer classroom kinship, allow for the sharing of history and experience spanning generations.

4. Our continued de/re/construction of our trans subjectivities spans material and virtual environments.

Researchers have pinpointed virtual environments as important spaces where transgender people can create and find community (Cipolletta, Votadoro, & Faccio, 2017; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2017). Educators could explore the creation of virtual spaces for students to process course information and their reactions to course content. Consider the possibility that these spaces remain anonymous for the safety and comfort of trans students. In ACS and the Doing Project, students with trans identities felt hyper visible and hyper aware of their identities. The majority of interactions were in person, and while there was a BlackBoard forum, participants in the class did not engage beyond writing their own post. More intentionality around the forum posts could have facilitated an environment where students could process together. Using in class text-in tools such as Poll Everywhere could give trans students an anonymous way to express their feelings in class through open ended questions and temperature checks.

5. “Trickle up activism” and grassroots coalition-building are, and will remain to be, orientations for our community.

In the classroom, emphasize person-centered allyship and opportunities for authentic kinship. Experiences such as the Doing Project can be improved by working on initiatives that trans people created for their community. Instead of starting new initiatives based on what students think trans people need, ask them to collaborate with student groups or trans organizations in the community.

6. In/visibility and its varied meanings are central to our senses of self, community, and kinship (Nicolazzo, 2017).

In a course centering a social identity, there is sure to exist a sort of dichotomy between folks who are “out” versus “not out.” Harm can be done on both sides as students who are out may be tokenized, and those who are not out may feel erased or unseen. As students explore their dynamic identities, students’ outness may change depending on the context of the course - for example, Jeanne and Soren discussed the events of the class through their shared trans identity outside of the classroom, but in class they experienced their transness very differently. Ben experienced the out/not out tension as well when he chose to disclose his trans identity further into the course after initially presenting as a cisgender man with his peers.

Students identities are not static; there is messiness, there is tension, and context matters. Educators must acknowledge the messiness and understand that a student’s comfort with being out can vary in classroom spaces. For those who are out and tokenized, it is the responsibility of the instructor to control and create a classroom where they intervene in moments of tokenization and strive to create an affirming atmosphere for trans students. For students who are not out, acknowledging that they exist is important. Break down ideas of what it means to be trans enough by acknowledging that any trans identity is enough and invite all folk’s narratives to the conversation.

## Looking Back to Move Forward as Educators

To end our manuscript, we wanted to share what we learned throughout our reflection and commitments towards trans liberation in classroom spaces. Through our commitments as educators, we hope to create spaces where trans students are centered through a trans epistemology.

*Jeane—I learned about the power of healing through community. Throughout the process of writing this manuscript, Ben, Soren, and I supported each other by validating our shared traumas and empowering one another to live out our truths. Thus, I commit to facilitating spaces where trans students, specifically trans people of color, can be in community with one another without having to choose between the intersections of their identities.*

*Ben—This class taught me the burden of tokenization, the consequences of in/visibility, and the power of embracing your authentic self. I learned how to create and hold boundaries that prioritized my own well-being and ability to be there for others, the differences in working “for” and working “with” communities, and the unintentional harm that even the best of intentions can cause. As an educator and aspiring professor-to-be, I commit to moving towards trans liberation by creating classroom spaces in which transgender students of all identities feel seen, heard, and validated; I commit to continue educating my cisgender students and peers on trans identities, issues, and inclusion. I am inspired to continue sharing my story and shifting the narratives around what is possible for trans folks to achieve - that we are healthy, happy, whole humans with so much to offer.*

*Soren—Reflecting on ACS and the Doing Project after a year and a half makes me realize how much my gender developed since the start of spring semester 2018. Change, process, and continual identity development are at the forefront of my mind. During ACS I felt pressure to know what being trans meant, and I learned that I still don’t know what that fully means for myself. I think feeling comfortable with liminal spaces is a large part of transness, and perhaps a large part of allyship. It took me a long time to be comfortable with that part of myself. If folks become comfortable with that liminal quality of transness, they can focus on person-centered allyship, like Jeane proposes. Because of Jeane and Ben, I also learned to appreciate how healing trans kinship can be, and I hope to share that kinship with students in the future because I needed that space in a class where I felt unsafe and tokenized.*

*Jay—Through teaching ACS and co-authoring this manuscript with Jeane, Ben, and Soren, I have reflected quite a lot on humility, good intentions, solidarity, and kinship. On a smaller scale, I’ve been revising and reenvisioning ACS and focusing on new pedagogical approaches to embrace a liberatory classroom experience. On a broader scale, I have continued to reflect on and question the role of higher education and college classrooms on working towards equity and justice for trans liberation.*

Our manuscript serves as a call to action for educators to implement a trans epistemology within classrooms as a way to resist trans tokenism and make way for trans liberation in education.



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