

Decolonizing Political Science Teaching: Students Matter

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Scholars such as Robbie Shilliam and Gurminder K. Bhambra have significantly contributed to decolonizing the political science curriculum and the discipline.¹ Decolonizing the curriculum begins by exposing the colonial origins of the discipline's concepts, frameworks, and methods. This initial stage invites students to interrogate the limitations of the formalized discipline more thoroughly, challenging the epistemological foundations of the Western canon. By dislodging the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of Western political studies, the next step is to diversify the perspectives and voices in the curriculum, moving beyond dominant canonical sources. This shift broadens the curriculum and encourages students to evaluate the discipline critically. From here, educators can reevaluate learning objectives, assignments, and assessment strategies to transition from atomized, competitive, and segmented approaches to more collective, collaborative, and holistic methods.

This curricular and pedagogical transformation must better reflect and be shaped by who our students are. The two of us teach within the discipline of political science at an elite PWI (Predominantly White Institution). When we decolonize our syllabi in this context, we primarily engage with those who benefit from structural inequality in the US and globally. However, *what we teach* and *how we teach* can vary greatly depending on the institution of higher education. For both of

¹ See Robbie Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics* (London: Polity Press, 2021); Gurminder K. Bhambra and John Holmwood, *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

us, teaching has occurred outside the confines of a prestigious research institution: in one case, at a high-security state prison in California, and in the other, at a women's university in India. Decolonizing our syllabi for students in these spaces looks very different precisely because of the differences in the student population.

In this paper, we use our experiences as teachers in multiple contexts to theorize a reflective decolonial pedagogy that centers on the importance of actual students in guiding the decolonization of political science curricula. Teaching about the US carceral state and prison abolition to young people in a competitive, co-ed, four-year university is quite different from teaching the same subject to incarcerated students. Similarly, teaching about gender and secularism in a co-ed university contrasts with teaching those topics in a women's university in the Global South. The goals of teaching these subjects are distinct. The types of information students need to be taught and the kinds of theorizing they generate from their experiences vary, meaning what they read and engage with in dialogue must also differ.

And yet, we are committed to decolonizing curricula in these disparate spaces by integrating students' experiences as the primary starting point for critical inquiry and learning. This approach ensures that the curriculum is diverse, relevant, engaging, and reflective of the students. It is evident that the same syllabus cannot be used in such divergent contexts. Decolonization must be attentive to the specific contexts of our students, not as a metaphor, as Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang stress, but as a political-ethical project aimed at the total transformation of settler-colonial society.²

Framework

The project of decolonizing political science education disrupts entrenched epistemic hierarchies and confronts the discipline's role in promoting and justifying logic of coloniality. As a

² Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

formalized and professionalized field, political science—broadly understood in this perspective as the scientific study of politics animated by interrogations of power concerning empire and citizenship—emerged in the late 19th century, deeply intertwined with imperial and colonial structures. This colonial genealogy profoundly shaped the discipline's core frameworks, narratives, and language, establishing a “social scientific” worldview of empire *qua* empire.

Central to the constitutive content of Western political science, Aníbal Quijano argues, is the establishment of hierarchies, systems of knowledge, cultural norms, and disciplinary standards that encompass society *in toto*.³ In this way, the study of politics is an epistemological foundation for colonial and imperial justifications of economic, bodily, intellectual, and cultural control.

The “decolonial turn” marks a significant shift, elaborating on the colonial divide in theories of embodiment, knowledge production, and economic exploitation while addressing the specificities of colonial and racial experiences. Decoloniality critically interrogates these entrenched disciplinary foundations, unsettling the lexicon of power and its constitutive elements. It invites us, individually and collectively, as practitioners of an “education of power” to re-learn the knowledge that modernity, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism have buried, discredited, or erased. Ethically and pedagogically, it explores colonization, settler colonialism, racial capitalism, modernity, and neoliberalism.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres underscores the persistence of colonial logic in knowledge production, societal organization, and pedagogical frameworks. His concept of the colonality of power situates modernity as a historical epoch that renders violence and domination intrinsic to its essentialist framing of progress.⁴ Political science, in its current form, as a discipline by and for the state, perpetuates—historically and presently—a mode of historicism rooted in specific ethical

³ Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–232.

⁴ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality* (Caribbean Studies Association, 2016), https://caribbeanstudiesassociation.org/docs/Maldonado-Torres_Outline_Ten_Theses-10.23.16.pdf.

principles that have shaped and organized the structures, norms, and hierarchies of our social world. Decolonial pedagogy actively challenges these foundations.

This perspective invites educators to question whose voices and experiences are prioritized in curricula and to recognize the exclusions these priorities perpetuate. In political science, the dominance of so-called “Great White Thinkers” like Locke, Kant, and Mill epitomizes Eurocentric bias. These figures not only underpin key theoretical paradigms but also perpetuate colonial and racialized assumptions, as evidenced by Locke’s defense of slavery and Kant’s theories of racial hierarchy. Robbie Shilliam critiques the Western academy’s monopolization of ethical inquiry and exclusion of non-European voices. By juxtaposing canonical figures like Kant with thinkers such as Édouard Glissant, Shilliam advocates for relational pluralism, redefining the terms of dialogue.⁵ This approach demonstrates the value of decolonizing political science: disrupting the monologues of Eurocentric modernity and reimagining knowledge production.

Decolonial methodologies unsettle these moral, political, and epistemological starting points by: i) challenging the notion of Western culture as universal while all other cultures are localized and particular; ii) rejecting naturalist racial theories that claim non-Europeans cannot achieve the same “progress” as Western societies; iii) reframing colonization not only as physical displacement but also as the colonization of minds; and iv) critiquing how colonial practices construct “truths” through the colonizers’ stories, gazes, and accounts, encoded in ideologies, discourses, institutions, and imagination.

However, decolonial methodologies are not without their limitations. Emma Pérez emphasizes that when constrained to materialist critiques, decolonial theory risks reinforcing the binaries it seeks to dismantle.⁶ Instead, Pérez’s concept of “the will to feel” underscores the

⁵ Robbie Shilliam, “Decolonising the Grounds of Ethical Inquiry: A Dialogue between Kant, Foucault and Glissant,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 3 (2011): 649–665.

⁶ Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999)3–7.

importance of affective and embodied experiences for cultivating new ways of knowing, integrating emotional and subjective dimensions into decolonial praxis.⁷

It is crucial, then, to recognize that there is no singular decolonial methodology. A plurality of approaches exists to decolonize political science curricula. For example, incorporating feminist and intersectional perspectives is invaluable. The works of Sylvia Wynter, María Lugones, and Gloria Anzaldúa offer frameworks that deconstruct the coloniality of gender and center the experiences of marginalized communities.⁸ This approach integrates lived experiences with critical theory, providing a model for decolonizing pedagogy that is reflective and transformative.

Decolonizing political science teaching thus demands a rethinking of content and pedagogical practices.⁹ It requires moving beyond the tokenistic inclusion of diverse texts to a comprehensive restructuring that interrogates the epistemic foundations of the discipline. This approach addresses historical injustices and equips students with the critical tools necessary to engage with the complexities of a pluralistic world. The following case studies underscore the practical considerations and approaches to decolonizing political science teaching. These cases serve not as blueprints for future modeling but as snapshots of specific moments where disciplinary norms were contested, creating spaces for qualitatively different methods of interrogating power and authority.

Defining Decolonial Pedagogy

⁷ Emma Pérez, “The Imaginary as Will to Feel: Beyond the Decolonial Turn in Chicana/Latina Feminism,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 45, no. 1 (2020): 243–252.

⁸ Sylvia Wynter, *We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk about a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1984); María Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender,” in *Feminisms in Movement* (2016): 35–58; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

⁹ Silethemba Medelline Guta, “An Overview onto the Decolonisation of Political Science in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Decolonial Studies* 12, no. 4 (2021): 36–46.

The first step in the development of a decolonial pedagogy is to make explicit the ways in which imperial projects and imperial thinking have been at the origin of Political Science. We have learned from accounts that place political thought within a broader colonial practice that as the colonizing project shaped much of our discipline, resistance to colonialism also brought into being counter-narratives with their fugitive, marron knowledge. A decolonial political science is attentive to both the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic modes of knowing about power.

Challenging the epistemological foundations of the Western canon is a critical early step in the development of a decolonial political science. This most commonly takes the form of revisions to reading lists. Instead of just Aristotle to Hegel to Rawls we also add Sun Tzu and Gandhi and Anzaldua. These voices are sometimes in deliberate conversation with the Western canon and sometimes they are voices building on a totally distinct tradition with its own debates and assumptions. Including these actors and thinkers broadens our perspectives, offers us a window into other worlds, and lets us imagine wider futures.

The practice of more inclusive reading leads to shifts away from teleological, great man centric accounts of history to more collaborative and playful visions of human action. Instead of assuming that humans are evolving in a particular (upward/forward) direction building on the individual disruptions and inventions of the singular genius, we see that our lives are interdependent and intertwined with other beings in relationships that can be parasitic, symbiotic, and? Power is made visible in intimate and public spaces. It is seen as more than a tool to be wielded by elites. Our attention is drawn to the contingent ways in which humans relate to things, to other species, to diverse others, and to those we consider our own. By seeing how our world was created (is being recreated every minute) we offer ourselves and our students new possibilities for how a future can be imagined and called into being.

But diversifying the curriculum is not enough. Reading and thinking together are creative acts and the context in which they occur matters deeply to what we create. In the next section we explore the ways in which context shapes our pedagogy through two case studies based on our experiences teaching the same topic in two very different places with very different students.

Case Studies: Context Specific Strategies

The question of *what* we teach is inextricably intertwined with the question of *who* we teach. Teaching is certainly about sharing the ideas and topics we find thrilling with our students. But if that's all it was, it would quickly become an exercise in narcissism as we took advantage of a captive audience to wax loquacious about our own intellectual preoccupations. We are committed to our discipline and to teaching because we see these as tools for liberation and empowerment. The point is to help ourselves and our students see the social world more clearly so they can act upon it. That means that we must know something of the particular social world that our students inhabit. And once we can perceive it we must shape our teaching accordingly.

Who our students are, and what their world looks like, shapes our learning goals, the readings we assign, and the discussion topics we select. The better we know our students the more we can adapt our teaching to their circumstances. As scholars interested in decolonial pedagogy, our teaching cannot be a simple transmission of big ideas to empty vessels. It must be adapted to the actual students we are interacting with. The goals and topics must be relevant to them. The assignments must be ones that let them practice the skills they need for their own activism and empowerment. One strategy for this is to invite the students' whole selves into the classroom. That is, we endeavor to treat students' lived experiences as valuable resources for critical inquiry. Each of them brings into the classroom an expertise based on their own lives that can collectively educate and edify us.

Case Study 1: Schools as disciplinary institutions – Nandini

One of us researches and teaches about the politics of education. Specifically, I am interested in how power and domination are woven into educational institutions (Foucault 1979), whose hidden curricula are always teaching students about their place in society (Hayward 1998). Through studying this subject, I want to help my own students see how they have been shaped by their previous educational experiences. That is, students should be able to think about the spatial setting, how time is divided, how bodies are placed, how rules are explained and enforced, and how exceptions are made in their schools. Using these observations and the theoretical texts I share with them I want them to “read” their educational biographies and how they nudged them towards certain outcomes.

The main point of this course is to show students how educational institutions are instruments of the reproduction of social divisions. Therefore, the particular social divisions and the social location of the students themselves becomes a key aspect of what we study. To make sense of how schools reproduce society it is necessary to name and analyze society’s power dynamics. I have taught this course in two locations. In each one the educational system is quite different, the kinds of students I am teaching are distinct, and the possibilities for resistance are different.

Scene 1: Opened in 2010, the STEPS building is a modern, eco-friendly structure that showcases Lehigh’s commitment to environmental sustainability. The building features an innovative design with extensive use of glass, steel, and natural light. It is LEED-certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and incorporates environmentally conscious elements such as a green roof, energy-efficient lighting, and water-saving systems. The building includes open atriums, study areas, and communal spaces to foster collaboration among students and faculty.

My students and I met in a room on the 4th floor with wide windows on two sides overlooking the Pennsylvania mountains with their bare trees and patches of snow. The furniture in

the room consisted of desks that were bolted in place, creating 8 shared spaces for 4-6 students with a lectern in one corner for the professor. Many of the students already knew each other as they were members of the college honors society and had taken previous seminars together. With this group of students I was aware that I was talking to young people who had likely been identified as gifted and talented in elementary school, who were constantly pushing themselves to study a bit more, to join one more extracurricular activity, who were accustomed to praise from their teachers and who were exceedingly good at following directions and building relationships in the classroom.

I talked to them about the idea of being groomed as “Excellent Sheep”, a book that resonated deeply with them. They were eager to read more and talk more about the messages they had imbibed from their lives as students and the spaces in which they still found room for creativity and authenticity. Many shared the pressure they felt to be successful, while some described families that supported learning for its own sake, regardless of career outcome. Using an ungrading approach allowed the students to relax, to engage fully in the class when they wanted to, but also to just float along when their other courses grew more demanding and they were losing sleep.

In the context of this elite university, working with our most successful students, my goal was to remind them that their time in college was their own. That it was their chance to explore their interests and discover the contributions they might make to society. I hoped to nudge them to consider meaningful work over simply the most lucrative options that would be open to them as they graduated.

One way the class offered a more relaxed and creative space was by inviting students to create an education manifesto for themselves in a visual form that would express their orientation to learning. This was the culminating assignment and let students do some “arts and crafts”. Some of them painted, one made an elaborate model of the kind of school she hopes to create in her home country, many others made posters, and some created powerpoint slides. The quality of their work

was seriously uneven. Some had clearly put a lot of thought and effort into their creations. Others had rushed through this assignment and were not particularly proud of them. However, even the students who essentially “blew off” the actual creative work could explain their vision for what education should be for themselves and others. The reflection had happened and the students demonstrated their lack of fear or desire to prove themselves to the instructor.

Those who worked hard were intrinsically motivated to do so while those whose imaginations were not sparked by this assignment could choose to submit a hastily thrown together product. The day of our “gallery” was joyful and students chatted with me and each other easily and comfortably.

By the end of the semester the class was a place the students said they looked forward to being. They found a space where they could reflect on their lives and talk with others who were making intentional choices about how to live in the world. Doing it without the anxiety of evaluation was new to them and while many were ambivalent about this as a general approach to education, they saw its value for this semester.

Scene 2: The main building of SNDT Women's University at the Churchgate campus in Mumbai features an elegant blend of colonial and modern architectural styles. The building is distinguished by its symmetrical façade, large arched windows, and a central entrance flanked by pillars. It has spacious corridors and high ceilings to accommodate the tropical climate. The building is just steps away from Churchgate train station which is downtown Mumbai's largest station for local trains. It faces challenges from the city's high humidity levels, especially during the monsoon season. The constant moisture accelerates wear and tear, leading to issues like peeling paint, damp patches, and the growth of moss or mold on walls. Wooden shutters and doors are prone to warping and decay, while metal fixtures may experience rust and corrosion. Most of the students travel from an hour or two away to attend classes. And of course, they all identify as women.

My students and I met on the 6th floor in a large classroom with small wooden desk-chairs for them and a larger desk at the front of the room for me. There was a fan but no air-conditioning. Windows opened onto a balcony that overlooked the central courtyard below where young women chatted in small groups and some played basketball. A man walked by every hour or so selling tea in tiny paper cups to faculty. The first day we met there were almost 40 students and even some teaching faculty in attendance. One of them introduced me formally and encouraged the students to make the most of my time with them. I was rather bemused by this large audience and wondered how to adapt my work to meet these students' needs. Most of them spoke English as a third language. Despite being Masters students, I discovered they had never been assigned a whole book to read. For many of them, being a student was the only thing delaying their marriage to a person selected by their parents.

For these students education is not the primary site of disciplinary power in their lives. Indeed, their status as women in a highly patriarchal society shapes their horizons of possibility in both quotidian and extraordinary ways. The Gender Development Index compares female to male health (life expectancy at birth), education (expected years of schooling for children and mean years of schooling for adults aged 25 years and older) and income (estimated GNI per capita). Based on these comparisons, for 2021, India has a GDI value of 0.849, which ranks it 127th out of 146 countries. Essentially the female human development index value for India is 0.567 in contrast with 0.668 for males. While women are expected to live longer than men (68.9:65.8), their education access is lower (6.3 years for women over 25 compared to 7.2 for adult men), and most disparate of all is the income differential (\$2,277:\$10,633) which shows men have around 4.5 times the income of women.¹⁰ The skewed sex ratios found in India have been estimated to mean that about 400,000 girls are “missing” at birth. That is, these female foetuses were aborted. In addition, another 240,000 die

¹⁰ UNDP. 2022. Human Development Reports: India Available at <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/IND> Accessed January 2023.

due to postnatal discrimination before their fifth birthday.¹¹ The gender imbalance seems to be narrowing over the past decade, especially among the wealthier and higher caste communities that previously had the greatest imbalance.¹² Third gender (trans) individuals surveyed in the 2011 census numbered almost half a million and were found to have a literacy rate of 56.07% as compared with men just over 80% and women at 65.46%.¹³

Looking at the Gender Inequality Index, India has a GII value of 0.490, ranking it 122 out of 170 countries in 2021. This index combines data on reproductive health, political representation, and formal labour market participation. India historically had a particularly high rate of maternal mortality which has only recently declined to below the global average as more births have taken place under medical care.¹⁴ Currently less than 14% of seats in parliament are held by women, despite a long history of prominent women leaders.¹⁵ The Indian parliament just passed a Women's Reservation Bill in Fall 2023 that will require a third of seats in national and state assemblies to be held by women but the legislation must be ratified by at least half the states to go into effect.¹⁶ There is also a marked gap in formal labour force participation with less than a fifth of women working outside the home as compared with 70% of men.¹⁷ Looking at beliefs about gender reveals that Indians hold discriminatory views against women.¹⁸ Almost half of men and women believe intimate

¹¹ UNFPA. 2021. "Sex ratio at birth in India: Recent trends and patterns" Available at <https://india.unfpa.org/en/news/sex-ratio-birth-india-recent-trends-and-patterns> Accessed September 2023.

¹² Pew Research Center. 2022. "India's Sex Ratio at Birth Begins to Normalize" Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/08/23/indias-sex-ratio-at-birth-begins-to-normalize/> Accessed September 2023.

¹³ Census of India 2011. <https://www.census2011.co.in/transgender.php> and <https://www.census2011.co.in/literacy.php> Accessed September 2022.

¹⁴ GOI. 2022. "Significant decline in maternal mortality in India" Ministry of Women and Child Development Available at <https://pib.gov.in/FeaturesDeatils.aspx?NoteId=151238&ModuleId%20=%202> Accessed September 2023.

¹⁵ Deo, Nandini. 2012. "Dynastic Democracies" Gateway House Available at <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/dynastic-democracies/> Accessed July 2016.

¹⁶ Phukan, Sandeep. 2023. "Lok Sabha passes historic women's reservation Bill" *The Hindu* September 20. Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lok-sabha-passes-womens-reservation-bill/article67327458.ece> Accessed September 2023.

¹⁷ UNDP. 2022. Human Development Reports: India Available at <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/IND> Accessed April 2023.

¹⁸ UNDP. 2023. Gender Social Norms Index Report Available at <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni#/indicies/GSNI> Accessed September 2023.

partner violence against women is justified in some cases and nearly a third of women report being subjected to violence in the home.¹⁹ Altogether a picture of systematic gender inequality and discrimination emerges from these statistics.

The causes of social exclusion on the basis of gender are complicated to identify and even more so to undo. The patriarchal control over women's reproductive abilities is crucial to ensuring endogamous marriages are the norm in Indian society. As long as endogamous marriages are the norm, caste boundaries can be maintained. In fact, B.R. Ambedkar pointed out in 1935 that, "The real remedy for breaking Caste is intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of Caste,"²⁰ and he identified the control of women's bodies through endogamy as the root cause of caste discrimination as early as 1917 in his work *Castes in India*.²¹ The control over women's ability to engage in sex and marriage is needed to maintain caste boundaries. I will discuss caste as a basis for social exclusion below, but for now it is important to flag the way in which attempts to equalise gender relations in India are also the most effective way to undermine caste exclusions. Caste cannot exist without community control over young people's love lives.

Nivedita Menon explains the foundational role of the family in creating a variety of social exclusions:

There is a certain social order based on caste hierarchy, community identities, extreme class inequality, compulsory institution of heterosexual marriage, and the family that emerges or is sanctified by the heterosexual patriarchal marriage. It is this family that will give you your caste identity, your religious community identity; it will tell you where you are in the social system, and give you your privileges, and discrimination. Family is at the base of every single inequality in the modern society in which we live.²²

¹⁹ Parihar, Pragati. 2023. "Around 30% of Married Indian Women Have Experienced Gender Based Violence: Study" *Feminism in India* Available at <https://feminisminindia.com/2023/05/30/30-married-indian-women-experienced-gender-based-violence/> Accessed September 2023.

²⁰ Ambedkar, B.R. 1935. *The Annihilation of Caste* Available at https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambekar/web/readings/aoc_print_2004.pdf (Pg 31).

²¹ Ambedkar, B.R. 1917. *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Castes_in_India:_Their_Mechanism,_Genesis_and_Development

²² Menon, Nivedita. 2022. "Gender attitudes in India: What's changed and what hasn't" *India Development Review* Podcast Available at

It is this connection between gender roles within the family and most other forms of exclusion shows how intersectionality shows up in India and for my students. Each form of social exclusion is connected with others and those who experience deprivation do so from a social location defined by multiple identities.

In order to teach these students about the disciplinary power of educational institutions, I had to remind myself about their emancipatory power. Educational institutions, not just education, can be a haven in which students experience the freedom of exploration and playful intellectual growth. They are being disciplined into norms about deference to authority but they are also reading and learning about forms of resistance. In the bonds they build with each other these students are finding the collective associational support that offers another body of support away from their families.

The family defines so much about a person in India. It brings with it a caste location, gendered norms and expectations for behavior, a strong demand that the individual subsume themselves to the collective good of the family. For my students who were traveling one or two hours by local train to arrive at the college, being on time was an expectation I had to relinquish. About half of them also arrived with no laptop or tablet for taking notes, reading, or writing. Instead they relied on their cell phones for all of their schoolwork. This was disconcerting for me as I am used to asking students to put away their cell phones in class.

Realizing that some of my assumptions about what the class could do was unrealistic given their time and resource constraints I could not in good conscience assign some of the long books I had at Lehigh or expect them to produce creative reflections. Instead I had to get creative and think about what would allow them to learn these ideas and grow their skills as scholars.

<https://idronline.org/podcasts/on-the-contrary-podcast-social-impact/gender-equality-where-are-we-today/> Accessed July 2023.

We began to communicate over Whatsapp. Only some of the students seemed to have email or if they had accounts they did not check them regularly. I invited each student to select a book they wanted to read (for their own thesis) and taught them how to write a review of the book. Instead of writing book reviews for academic journals, we worked on reviewers for the main electronic commerce websites in India. We read examples, discussed the forms that worked, and I asked the class to write and post their reviews after getting feedback from me.

This assignment had several features that made it work well. First, the students were being invited to select a book that would be useful for them and which they had to read anyway. Second, they were being asked to think about their audience and writing for general readers rather than just their teachers. They could access the books and example reviews using their phones. They got to teach me and each other about a book and subject they were passionate about already. I was able to learn about their interests and also learn substantively from them about their topics.

The assignment positioned these women as experts who could speak about intellectual work to anyone. Placing myself in the position of a student was a radical act. In an environment in which so much deference is paid to teachers, offering them a chance to educate me was surprising and exciting. Did I achieve the goals of the course? These were to, “show students how educational institutions are instruments of the reproduction of social divisions.” Yes and no. Students became aware of how contingent the teacher-student relationship is and how they are able to remake it. They rely on their teachers for a great deal of mentoring beyond the classroom, which I was unable to provide as an outsider who was only visiting for a few months. I am not sure they want to be in a more egalitarian teacher-student dynamic but they had a chance to experience it in a way that will stay with them. It certainly left an impression on me.

Case Study 2: Teaching the US Carceral State & Prison Abolition – Dean

Having taught across the higher education landscape—from college-in-prison programs to Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), community colleges, adult education programs, and dual enrollment initiatives—I have encountered a recurring pedagogical mantra: “Meet students where they are.” This adage, celebrated by institutions and colleagues alike, is a cornerstone for teaching nontraditional students.²³ While valuable, this approach is not without its complexities. It compels educators to acknowledge the holistic identities of their students, who often navigate multifaceted and precarious life worlds. Students are not solely learners enrolled in their programs of study; they are also workers, caregivers, parents, and veterans. Recognizing these realities is crucial, yet it raises important questions about balancing empathy with accountability.

When I began teaching political science courses in post-secondary contexts, I embraced the principle of “meeting students where they are” by integrating flexibility into my practices.²⁴ This approach included extending assignment deadlines, personalizing course topics, utilizing Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) or Open Educational Resources (OER), and sharing my educational journey, which institutional barriers had shaped.²⁵ These efforts fostered trust and connection with my

²³ This is a highly contested term. For this paper, I use the broader scope of the definition offered by the U.S. Department of Education’s terminology, which uses enrollment patterns, financial dependency status, family situation, and high school graduation status as the primary criteria. See National Center for Education Statistics. (2002). *Nontraditional Undergraduates* (NCES 2002-012); <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002012.pdf>.

²⁴ This approach has significant value, particularly when rethinking and redesigning accessible teaching and learning practices for students, especially in contexts shaped by institutional and societal barriers. Cf. Alan A. Arroyo, Randy Rhoad, and Priscilla Drew, “Meeting Diverse Student Needs in Urban Schools: Research-Based Recommendations for School Personnel,” *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth* 43, no. 4 (1999): 145–153; Ken Pransky and Francis Bailey, “To Meet Your Students Where They Are, First You Have to Find Them: Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse At-Risk Students,” *The Reading Teacher* 56, no. 4 (2002): 370–383; Mary E. Sunderland, “Taking Emotion Seriously: Meeting Students Where They Are,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 20 (2014): 183–195.

²⁵ Open Educational Resources (OER) and Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) are distinct, though often conflated, concepts in the context of course materials. OER refers to teaching, learning, and research materials that are either in the public domain or carry an open license, granting users free access and permission to adapt and redistribute them. In contrast, ZTC pertains to a class, degree, or pathway where students incur no textbook costs. While these terms are frequently used interchangeably, they emphasize different aspects of educational resources: ZTC focuses on eliminating the financial burden for students, whereas OER emphasizes the licensing and adaptability of the materials. Adopting these resources can significantly reduce financial barriers, enabling students to enroll, persist, and complete their coursework without the stress of expensive textbooks. Moreover, OER offers educators a high degree of flexibility, allowing them to customize content to align with their unique pedagogical approaches. I strongly encourage educators to explore these

students. I observed that students became more engaged during classroom discussions, performed better on assessments, and were likelier to complete the course.

For example, during my first year of teaching, I instructed the department's survey course, Introduction to American Politics. This course was a program requirement for political science majors and also fulfilled a General Education (GE) social science requirement for non-majors. Consequently, the highly enrolled sections attracted diverse students—ranging from those with clear academic goals in political science to others on entirely different educational trajectories. This diversity posed significant challenges, reflected in a five-year non-pass rate of nearly 35%. This statistic underscores the inherent difficulties of teaching politics in a deeply polarized society and the broader decline in civic education curricula at the K-12 level.

However, my commitment to “meeting students where they are” yielded remarkable results. Over five years, across two different institutions—a research university and a community college—I taught 28 sections of the introductory American politics course, enrolling nearly 1,000 students. By prioritizing flexibility and student-centered practices, I reversed the historical trend of high non-pass rates: 95% of the students completed the course, earning credit applicable to their degree requirements.

While these metrics are promising—and though I hesitate to equate success solely with quantitative output measures—they revealed a critical limitation in my initial approach. I realized that universalizing nontraditional students as a homogeneous group oversimplified the diverse and complex realities they bring to the classroom. By assuming where my students came from and how they navigated their life worlds, I risked overlooking their unique motivations, experiences, and aspirations.

options before adopting cost-prohibitive texts. I recommend platforms like [OpenStax](#), [LibreTexts](#), and [MIT OpenCourseWare](#) for educators seeking high-quality OER resources.

Even though flexible deadlines or customized assignments are valuable, they often fail to account for each student's individuality. I began to recognize that nontraditional students, particularly those in nontraditional spaces, represent a vast array of life worlds and starting points shaped by rich and often complex lived experiences. A homogenizing approach—treating all students the same—inevitably erases this multiplicity.

This realization prompted a significant shift in my teaching philosophy. I moved beyond disciplinary norms and traditional success metrics to focus on genuinely meeting *each student* where they are. This required rethinking how I structured courses, presented material, assessed students, and intentionally accounted for their unique skills, talents, and lived experiences. My goal was to move beyond simply teaching political science by disciplinary standards to approaching it grounded in empathy, adaptability, and a deep appreciation for the complexity of students' lives, intending to foster political engagement.

This shift became even more pronounced when I began teaching in college-in-prison programs at two state prisons in California's Central Valley. As I've noted elsewhere, carceral education presents immense logistical and curricular challenges, from restricted access to limited resources and technologies to heightened administrative oversight.²⁶ The most significant aspect, however, was not the limitations but the students themselves. Incarcerated learners bring profound insights into the dynamics of power, authority, and institutional violence—lived knowledge that fundamentally reorients the starting point of an interrogation of power and authority. A discussion on the racist, colonial foundations of the plantation system and its evolution into mass incarceration was no longer framed as an abstract "object" for exploration. Instead, students recognized themselves and their generational histories—marked by violence, trauma, and liberation—within the

²⁶ See Dean Caivano, "A Classroom of Equals: Lessons for a Critical Prison Pedagogy" (under review). For a copy of the paper, please contact me at dcc212@lehigh.edu.

subject of analysis. For them, the historical and political conditions that produced the prison system became a vivid tableau for genealogical exploration rather than a detached case study.

Conversely, exploring the same topic outside the prison—such as at a predominantly white, elite research institution—produced a markedly different dynamic. Students in this context often approached the material with an entrenched object-subject positionality, viewing themselves as subjects tasked with mastering terminology, concepts, and frameworks to analyze an external object. While this approach has the potential to facilitate critical learning, it often lacks the embodied engagement that incarcerated students brought to the discussion. This contrast underscores a vital pedagogical insight: when teaching complex issues such as the histories of social control and state power, students' lived experiences and life worlds profoundly shape their engagement with the material. Teaching political science in differing settings requires a recalibration of pedagogical approaches to fully account for and illuminate the depth and diversity of students' perspectives.

To illustrate this point, I offer two key pedagogical distinctions and related practices that have the potential to enrich, rather than hinder, the learning process in different environments. By sharing snapshots of content taught in the same class under catalog standards—inside and outside prison settings—I aim to demonstrate the benefits of embracing flexibility, adaptability, and recognizing students' life worlds in teaching methods. The course I will discuss is my Introduction to Political Thought seminar, focusing on the unit titled “Violence, Control, and Liberation.” This part of the course examines theories and histories of social control, state violence, mass incarceration, the prison-industrial complex, digital surveillance, and prison abolition. Drawing on diverse theoretical frameworks—including post-structuralism, Frantz Fanon's decolonial thought, post-Marxist psychoanalysis, and feminist critiques—students grapple with how forces beyond their control shape their identities, positionality, and agency.²⁷

²⁷ Here is a small sample of the thinkers we engage with theoretically in our Introduction to Political Thought class: Gilles Deleuze, Edward Said, Hannah Arendt, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa.

While the two sections of the course were identical by institutional standards—including units earned, student learning objectives (SLOs), and reading/writing thresholds—the uniformity is misleading. It conceals the profound challenges and unique joys of teaching in two vastly different settings. The first setting was inside Valley State Prison, a Level III high-security facility in California’s Central Valley, through a college-in-prison program. The second was at Lehigh University, a predominantly white, elite four-year research institution in eastern Pennsylvania. These pedagogical insights highlight the importance of recognizing and leveraging the diverse experiences of student populations to create tailored, impactful learning environments.

When an educator begins with the student’s starting point—an epistemological assumption—rather than that of the educator or disciplinary norms, the classroom shifts from a space of transactional learning to one of reciprocal interrogation and shared discovery.

#1: Demystifying Metanarratives of Beginnings

Teaching about the history and current iterations of the American prison system often feels abstract and detached in traditional academic settings. For many students, their primary exposure to prisons comes from cultural narratives in film and television, which depict incarceration as a necessary response to societal threats. These dominant metanarratives shape students’ intellectual assumptions, critically complicating efforts to engage with the concept of prison abolition.

Exploring key texts on abolition and the imaginative capacities of alternative strategies often remains confined within the narrow boundaries of societal expectations and depictions. Students frequently struggle to conceive of feasible alternatives to locking up “bad actors” without compromising public order, safety, or—most profoundly, as shaped by their experiences—the protection of private property. Conceptually, students may rigorously understand critiques of the carceral system and possess a strong base of knowledge regarding its historical development. At

Lehigh University, for instance, many of my students, often from affluent backgrounds and well-resourced public or elite private schools, are fluent in the central theses offered by Michelle Alexander, Ibram X. Kendi, and *The 1619 Project*.²⁸ Yet, for these students, discussions of abolition are frequently reduced to idealistic or outright utopian notions. Their difficulty imagining alternatives to incarceration reflects less a pessimism about change and more a pragmatic acceptance of what they perceive as limited possibilities.

The result is a learning environment rich in analytical rigor and textual exegesis, grounded in a keen awareness of historical and contemporary debates. However, what is strikingly absent is the human impact of incarceration. For most students—particularly at elite private institutions—personal connections to histories of incarceration are marginal at best. Approaching abolition as an external object suitable for social scientific inquiry often leads students to treat the liberation of nearly two million incarcerated individuals as an abstract exercise in quantifiable experimentation.

I recommend challenging students to see the carceral state in their own lives to address this disconnect. For example, in our initial sessions on the prison's architecture and abolition, I share my experiences teaching in college-in-prison programs. To accompany these narratives, I present a series of photographs filled with symbols of control—surveillance cameras, cement-block classrooms, razor-wire fencing around academic buildings, painted lines on the ground for walking and stopping, and signs enforcing silence. Naturally, students assume these images depict a prison. They interpret my narration and photographs as a firsthand, behind-the-scenes glimpse of the monolithic image of the prison. However, I then revealed that the photographs were not taken inside a prison (which is

²⁸ See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016); Nikole Hannah-Jones, ed., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

prohibited due to strict regulations against outside cameras or cell phones) but at my daughter's elementary school.

This disclosure often elicits visible shock, surprise, and even audible gasps. What follows is even more telling: once the initial sleight of hand loses its impact, students begin to identify how these images resemble their schools, our campus, public transit systems, ATMs, and other spaces of daily life. The aim here is not to equate an elementary school with a state prison *pace* Foucault but to decenter an exploration by reframing control, surveillance, and discipline practices from a subjectively familiar and intersubjective starting point. This offers a critique against Eurocentric claims of knowledge production confronting epistemological and methodological foundations of traditional education models, calling instead for a pedagogy of and for emancipation.²⁹

From this space of personal familiarity, we move into the deeply human dimension of incarceration by examining first-person accounts, recollections, and narratives from incarcerated individuals. This exercise is not intended to sensationalize or trivialize these voices but to reveal the corporeal and human realities often absent from cultural and scholarly discussions about incarceration. By demystifying the metanarrative of the prison as a societal necessity, students come to recognize prisons as deliberately structured to make people disappear. As Angela Davis argues, these are spaces fundamentally designed against habitation.³⁰

This shift in perspective—seeing the human impact of incarceration alongside the pervasive matrix of control that intersects both inside and outside carceral institutions—tends to make students more receptive to calls for dismantlement. They begin to envision projects of replacement

²⁹ See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

³⁰ See Angela Y. Davis, “Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex,” *Colorlines* (Fall 1998), <https://colorlines.com/article/masked-racism-reflections-prison-industrial-complex/>; *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005).

rooted in life, care, community, and social connection rather than isolation and dehumanization. In this way, abolition transforms from an abstract concept to a tangible framework for creating a more just and humane society.

Conversely, incarcerated students often arrive with a deeply personal and critical understanding of the carceral state rooted in lived experiences. These students bring complex and intricate interactions with a broad array of punitive institutions—systems built upon colonial structures of dehumanization and othering. Put differently, they already possess a robust understanding of institutional control and violence—not just from the prison system but also from the foster care system, predatory capitalism, immigration policies, and dispossession, among others. This enables them to provide a rigorous critique of how welfare programs and other ostensibly humanitarian efforts often replicate carceral logic.

For incarcerated students, the human dimension of carceral is a lived reality and a natural starting point for critical inquiry. Yet, like students in traditional settings, they also bring their assumptions into the classroom—not necessarily about the prison, but about education itself. For many, stepping foot inside a college classroom was once unthinkable. Pursuing higher education was not an option on the outside. It is jarring to hear students describe how it took “being convicted of a felony to finally make it to college.” This somber reflection underscores the insidious scope of the cradle-to-prison pipeline and the systemic inequities—along racial, ethnic, linguistic, sex, and class lines—that have long obstructed access to higher education in the United States. It also serves as a reminder for prison educators that the educational system itself is often fraught with exclusionary and punitive histories.

This realization requires addressing a critical metanarrative: the belief that education is another form of control—disciplinary, punitive, and exclusionary. In an idealized liberal arts framework, education is celebrated as an intrinsic good for personal transformation, enlightenment,

and civic cultivation. Universities perpetuate these metanarratives as spaces of self-discovery, intellectual growth, and societal leadership. While there may be some truth to these claims, they obscure higher education's primary function: producing docile, obedient workers for capitalist markets.³¹ Traditional students often internalize these dual narratives, believing in both the transformative power of education and its social capital. Universities exploit these desires, promising intimate learning experiences alongside substantial economic returns, reducing students to customers, and further marketizing all domains of social life.³²

For most incarcerated students, however, the economic impact of a college degree is rarely their primary motivation. Nor is there an intrinsic belief in the virtue of higher education. Instead, skepticism prevails—an uncertainty about the benefits, impact, or significance of spending time in a classroom. This skepticism often extends to the educator, who may be viewed as unreliable, performing the role of either a cosplaying social justice warrior or an undercover corrections officer. Educators are often perceived as extensions of state authority in this context, reinforcing that the classroom is yet another iteration of discipline and control, especially in the “struggles of the racialized and gendered experiences of students.”³³

Prison educators, therefore, must embrace the challenge of demystifying the classroom as a space of punishment, exclusion, and marginalization.³⁴ While situated within both the historically exclusionary institution of higher education and the repressive institution of the carceral state, the

³¹ Dean Caivano, Rodney Doody, Terry Maley, and Chris Vandenberg, “Critical Pedagogy in the Neoliberal University” in *Marcuse in the Twenty-First Century: Radical Politics, Critical Theory, and Revolutionary Praxis*, ed. Robert Kirsch and Sarah Surak (London: Routledge, 2018).

³² See Roger L. Geiger, *Knowledge and Money: Research Universities and the Paradox of the Marketplace* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Jennifer Washburn, *University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Sanford Schram, “The Future of Higher Education and American Democracy: Introduction,” *New Political Science* 36, no. 4 (2014): 425–37; Sanford Schram, *The Return to Ordinary Capitalism: Neoliberalism, Precarity, Occupy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³³ Suniti Sharma, “Contesting Institutional Discourse to Create New Possibilities for Understanding Lived Experience: Life-Stories of Young Women in Detention, Rehabilitation, and Education,” in *Education and Incarceration*, ed. Erica R. Meiners and Maisha T. Winn (New York: Routledge, 2012), 73.

³⁴ James S. Vacca, “Educated Prisoners Are Less Likely to Return to Prison,” *The Journal of Correctional Education* 55, no. 4 (2004): 301.

classroom can also hold the potential for transformation. I propose an alternative pedagogical approach grounded in mutual respect, personal authenticity, and vulnerability to realize this potential. This approach requires shedding the facade of the disciplinary expert as the sole source of knowledge and embracing honesty and humanity.

This includes learning students' names, sharing your educational journey, and connecting course material to personal experiences. Educators can challenge traditional hierarchical learning norms by rejecting the expectation that students and educators enter the classroom as empty vessels devoid of individuality. Instead, be who you are—not what institutionalized expectations dictate. Do not hesitate to express confusion over course material, share a laugh, tell a joke, or pose questions to students. Bring what is often absent in intractable bureaucratic institutional structures: the personal.

This pedagogical commitment requires a significant reorientation in how educators engage with their students. It demands an ethos of care and recognition of education's transformative potential.³⁵ However, it also requires acknowledging the emotional labor involved, which disproportionately affects educators from marginalized backgrounds.³⁶ These individuals already bear significant emotional burdens outside the classroom, raising concerns about burnout and inequitable divisions of labor among educators.

It is also essential to consider how an educator's positionality and intersecting identities shape their acceptance by the student population. For incarcerated students, whose experiences with systemic inequities often reinforce preconceptions about authority, educators must carefully navigate this terrain. Authentic engagement must be built on trust and care, ensuring educators can foster community without personal depletion.

³⁵ See Lauren Wolf, "Teaching in a Total Institution: Toward a Pedagogy of Care in Prison Classrooms," *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry* 6, no. 2 (2020): 209–215.

³⁶ Nicole Patrie, "Learning to Be a Prison Educator," *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry* 4, no. 1 (2017): 18.

This stark contrast between traditional and incarcerated students highlights the need to adapt curricula and pedagogies to align with the divergent starting points of these learners. Both groups experience a crisis of imagination: an inability to envision a society without prisons and, in some cases, to see themselves as fully integrated members of society. Without acknowledging these disparate beginnings, such considerations risk being relegated to the margins of active learning rather than placed at its center.

#2: Internal – External

The next pedagogical practice, based on a distinction between traditional and nontraditional students, I recommend for teaching about the carceral state is rethinking assessment modalities. A strong caution: I do not maintain that assessments are the quintessential measure of whether a student is thinking critically or reflectively about the material. As higher education tools, assessments often rank and sort students, enabling them to acquire social capital for future economic value. Most assessments primarily measure a student's ability to memorize and recall information about specific problems or sets of problems. Rarely do they reveal critical thinking or demonstrate whether students have truly learned about our social world.

For this reason, I approach assessments less as measures of proficiency and more as opportunities for critical expression. I invite students to wrestle with the material, think through its implications, and use assessments—whatever their form—to engage deeply with key terms and concepts in political science. Customization is critical, tailored to the type of students in the classroom. Assignment orientation can shape how students perceive the material and either limit or expand their engagement with the subject.

For traditional students at Lehigh University, I recognize that they excel at analyzing and explaining central arguments in rigorous and articulate ways. Many have demonstrated an impressive

ability to elaborate on complex texts, which is challenging. However, these students often struggle to connect what we read in class to their lived experiences. They possess a unique skill set for rigorous textual analysis and elucidation of arguments but frequently lack recognition of the lived-in dimensions of these concepts. With this in mind, I design assessments using a scaffolding framework that moves students from external to internal evaluations of class material.

For example, in our discussion of social forms of control and surveillance, I ask students to identify these practices in their environment from a seemingly external, objective perspective. During an in-class assessment, students are tasked with mapping the classroom to identify how forms of control and governmentality are coded into the physical landscape of a learning space.

Instructions for the Classroom Mapping Exercise
1. Observe the classroom environment, paying attention to relationships, interactions, and power dynamics. 2. Using the blank map provided, draw connections and annotate them with short labels or symbols to represent course concepts (e.g., “Foucault – surveillance” for classroom rules, “Rousseau – social contract” for participation). 3. Identify at least three interactions or patterns you notice. 4. Write 2-3 sentences at the bottom of the page explaining: ○ How does your map connect to one or more theoretical concepts? ○ Why are these observations significant in understanding structured spaces like the classroom?

This assessment encourages students to link important terms, concepts, and symbols to their immediate surroundings while maintaining an intellectual distance that provides a “safe” analytical

lens. This illusion of externality allows students some respite before delving into how these external structures also produce subjected individuals.

Following this exercise, students complete an independent assessment that turns this critical lens inward. For instance, they are invited to explore Foucault's concept of the panopticon in their own lives through a guided assignment.

Locating the Panopticon Around (and Within) You

Foucault writes, "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" In this assignment, students are asked, "Who is watching you?" They must:

1. Locate a physical or digital site in their vicinity containing elements of a panopticon.
2. Indicate its physical/digital location.
3. Describe its features and design.
4. Reflect on these questions:
 - Are you always aware this object is watching you?
 - Does it modify your behavior?
 - Now that you are aware of it, will your behavior change?

This process—from external observation to internal examination—bridges the gap between theory and praxis. It helps students apply theoretical concepts to their lived experiences, fostering deeper understanding and critical engagement.

By contrast, incarcerated students bring a deep, lived understanding of power relations, sovereignty, structural violence, and modes of authority. Their experiences provide a visceral familiarity with applying such concepts, even if they lack discipline-specific terminology. For these students, I reverse the external-to-internal framework, starting instead with personal experiences as

the foundation for academic inquiry. For some, the inherent tensions and limitations of grounding class discussions in the complex layers of students' histories pose challenges to balancing personal narratives with broader academic inquiry.³⁷ These concerns are particularly critical when the disclosure of personal narratives, induced by the educator, lacks a vision for the future or proposed solutions, reducing the exposition of pain, trauma, and violence to a crude form of tokenism. However, when approached in a space of active learners, discussions about the methodological value—and limitations—of grounding learning in the personal can help shape the discursive boundaries, fostering a more collectively productive space for meaningful engagement.

I emphasize narrative and autoethnography as pedagogical tools, inviting students to connect their lived experiences to theoretical frameworks.³⁸ For instance, I pair canonical texts with first-person accounts, encouraging students to grapple simultaneously with abstract theory and lived realities. Additionally, I ask students to draft their own manifestos, articulating their vision of the world, critiquing established governance systems, and proposing alternative societal structures. These manifestos often blend personal reflection with academic rigor, producing powerful and engaging critiques.³⁹

Through collective dialogue, these narratives become the foundation for bridging theory and practice. This internal-to-external framework cultivates agency, introspection, and critical thinking while promoting a collective interrogation of the material. By tailoring assessments to the needs of both traditional and nontraditional students, educators can celebrate existing skills while challenging learners to expand their analytical toolkits. This approach recognizes the diverse strengths and

³⁷ Cf. Ragnhild Utheim, "The Case for Higher Education in Prison: Working Notes on Pedagogy, Purpose, and Preserving Democracy," *Social Justice* 43, no. 3 (2016): 99–102.

³⁸ Dean Caivano and Sarah Naumes, *The Sublime of the Political: Narrative and Autoethnography as Theory* (Bielefeld and New York: transcript-Verlag & Columbia University Press, 2021).

³⁹ See Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Maladies of Our Souls: Identity and Voice in the Writing of Academic International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2004): 377–92; Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker, "Autoethnographic International Relations: Exploring the Self as a Source of Knowledge," *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010): 779–98; Himadeep Muppidi, *The Colonial Signs of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2013); Annick Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (London: Routledge, 2011).

starting points of all students, fostering a dynamic and inclusive learning environment that prioritizes their specific contexts—not merely as a metaphor for “nontraditional students” or “meeting students where they are” but as a political-ethical project.

In this way, destabilizing assumptions about who is a “source of knowledge,” what constitutes legitimate forms of knowledge, how learning must occur, and which sources are central to the study of politics becomes essential. Instead of adhering to traditional hierarchies, students' own knowledge bases serve as the lens for future inquiry, a model for critiquing settler-colonial society, and a catalyst for its transformation. By aligning pedagogy with the lived realities of students, educators can reimagine the boundaries of knowledge production by unsettling the norms and practices of exclusionary education.

Conclusion

Decolonizing political science teaching requires more than revising and diversifying reading lists; it demands a fundamental rethinking of the discipline's epistemological foundations, pedagogical approaches, and engagement strategies. This process also necessitates a keen awareness of *who* is enrolled in our classes. As our case studies illustrate, decolonizing curricula is deeply contextual, shaped by the institutions we teach and the students we serve. There is no singular method or fixed blueprint for fostering learning conditions conducive to critical political-ethical engagement—decolonial pedagogy must remain adaptive, reflexive, and responsive to the lived realities of learners.

Yet, significant challenges remain. Based on our experiences, we are acutely aware of the institutional constraints within elite universities—entrenched within a matrix of power that intersects with the military-industrial complex, defense research, land dispossession, and capitalist-colonial

logic of control. These structures create substantial barriers to pedagogical approaches that seek to foster radical transformations.

In carceral spaces, where access to resources is already restricted, we recognize the fundamental tension between critical inquiry *within* formalized educational programs and the reinforcement of institutional hierarchies of control. Moreover, alongside other educators, we must grapple with the necessity of avoiding the tokenization of marginalized perspectives *sui causa* rather than genuinely re-centering them within and across the curriculum. These challenges do not invalidate the pursuit of a critical pedagogical approach; instead, they underscore the need for continuous interrogation, recalibration, and dialogue.

Ultimately, decolonizing political science teaching is an ongoing, dynamic process—an evolving political-ethical project that compels educators and students to rethink knowledge, power, and the role of education in shaping emancipatory possibilities. By centering students as active participants in this process and acknowledging their lived experiences, we can create classrooms that are not merely transactional spaces designed to reproduce the status quo but sites of critical transformation.