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Designing a Just Course: Justice Studies Pedagogy in Action

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Abstract

Justice studies is a relatively new discipline that draws from many theoretical foundations to ground scholarship and teaching in the critical analysis of systems and structures centering questions of fairness and responsibility. This paper highlights the process of designing an Introduction to Justice Studies course that reflects the values of our discipline. It introduces the discipline and articulates the values of justice studies pedagogy. The paper provides examples from the course redesign that reflect those values and offers insights for others who seek to build just courses.

Keywords: inclusive pedagogy, justice studies, higher education, collaborative teaching

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Introduction

This paper highlights a redesign of the introductory course to an interdisciplinary major at a midsize regional research institution in the United States. While the content of the course is specific to the justice studies discipline, shared challenges, innovative pedagogical interventions, and reflective lessons provide strategies for faculty and academic units seeking inclusive, intentional introductory courses that facilitate equitable burden sharing as well as growth from collaboration and cooperation.

In 2005, two faculty members from the Departments of Sociology and Political Science launched a new interdisciplinary academic major in justice studies at James Madison University, a public four-year college in Harrisonburg, Virginia (United States). Today, our major features faculty and curricula from a range of disciplines and fields including anthropology, criminology, disability studies, education, English, geography, law, political science, sociology, social psychology, and writing studies. Students earn a bachelor's degree and may choose a General Justice Studies major or select a concentration in Criminal Justice and Criminology, Global Justice and Policy, or Social Justice Engagement.

In the twenty years since we came into existence, similar programs have launched at other universities in the United States, but we remain unique in our holistic approach to justice studies as an academic discipline. All majors share a core curriculum that begins with a prerequisite Introduction to Justice Studies course. Unlike many disciplines, there is no standard content curriculum nor popular textbook for the introductory course. The course was originally designed and taught exclusively by two faculty members, with an additional one joining in 2014. Beginning in 2012, most sections of the introductory course transitioned to an online format with larger sections. This allowed us to provide more seats for new majors and offer additional upper-level electives to our existing majors. Over time it became clear that the earlier iteration was no longer meeting our departmental objectives. Larger contextual factors including the global pandemic, student mental health crisis, summer 2020 racial justice protests, and changing technologies provided an opening for all of us to reconsider our teaching practices. Within our academic unit, staffing changes, enrollment growth, and curriculum changes created a need to revisit our introductory course beginning in 2022. We surveyed faculty about our objectives for the introductory course and one clear goal emerged: an inclusive and rigorous introductory course that reflects our justice values.

The redesign was led by the authors of this paper. Daisy L. Breneman is a white, United-States born settler, whose disciplinary background is disability studies and writing studies. She has been at the institution for

over 25 years, joining Justice Studies in 2014. She is also an assistant director of JMU's Center for Faculty Innovation, in the Well-Being Area. Her research interests include disability studies, justice studies, faculty development, pop culture, and inclusive well-being. Tara Parsons is a white, United States-born settler, who holds a PhD in Political Science. She is an Associate Professor of Justice Studies and joined the Department in 2012. She most often teaches courses in the Global Justice and Policy concentration as well as the general education course Justice in United States Society. Her research interests center political participation strategies of those previously excluded from power including Indigenous resistance, women's political participation, and pedagogical interventions to encourage civic engagement. Both authors come from working-class backgrounds and would not have attended college without scholarships and financial aid. Our own experiences as college students, as well as many years teaching first-year students, provide insight and experience into the needs of students and barriers to their success.

In the paper that follows, we explore the context and objectives of the course, introduce justice studies and a justice studies pedagogy that guided our decision making, explore specific values and features of our praxis, and offer reflections to help others seeking to design courses that embrace challenge, inclusivity, and justice. While our explorations are rooted in our own contexts, they can be mapped to the various contexts in which we all teach.

Context and Objectives

As we navigated the redesign of our introductory course, we encountered structural, logistical, and pedagogical challenges as we established our course objectives. This course is a gateway course as defined by Koch (2025) in that it is foundational, high-risk, and high enrollment. It introduces the core knowledge and skills required of the Justice Studies major; students must pass the course to continue in the major, and all students in the major must take the course. While not our intention, gateway courses are sometimes referred to as 'weed out' courses, meaning one objective of the course is to discourage any student unable to succeed from continuing in the major. This is problematic from a justice lens for multiple reasons, including considering who is most often weeded out. Koch (2017) found that race and ethnicity, income, and first-generation status were correlates of who passes or fails in a study of introductory U.S. history courses at 32 colleges and universities. Asian American, white, and female students (unless they were first generation or receiving federal financial aid) were more likely to succeed. All others were more likely to fail or withdraw from these courses.

In addition to being a gateway course, the Introduction to Justice Studies course can be especially daunting because most students have no background with justice studies content, unlike history, English, or other disciplines. While interdisciplinarity enriches the discipline and the course, students are challenged with unprecedented flexibility. There is not one set of rules to guide their learning. Adapting to new content and methodology adds additional demands to our introductory course, as does the sometimes emotionally charged nature of the topics we explore; addressing injustices in the world adds emotional weight and takes up student bandwidth, as well. We desired an entry course to the major that challenged students, encouraged growth, and upheld academic standards but did not disadvantage less privileged students. A central question emerged: how do we start students in the major on an equitable foundation?

Logistical challenges also shaped our objectives for the redesign. As the entry of course to the major, at least 100 students require access to the course each year. One classroom can be composed of traditional first year students, transfer students from community colleges, adult learners, international students, first generation students, and students from marginalized communities. Students arrive with different perspectives, experiences, and needs. Research finds that students enrolled in larger classes have fewer academic interactions with their professors and their peers and that this impact is greater for first-generation, Black, and Latino students (Beattie and Thiele, 2016). Smaller class sizes support inclusivity through diversified student-centered learning experiences and increased scholarly connection, but offering more sections requires more teaching capacity. Another question therefore framed our redesign objectives: how do we ensure smaller class sizes while meeting enrollment demand?

There are also disincentives for faculty to teach entry-level required courses. Academic units are often evaluated by upper administration using student retention as a key metric. High rates of students leaving the major or university bring increased scrutiny and oversight that strain against the academic freedom of faculty. Systemic biases in student evaluations against marginalized faculty are well-established, and the discriminatory impact can be even greater in required courses (Miles and House, 2015). For example, research has shown that student teaching evaluations are lowest in large, required classes taught by female-identifying faculty (Miles and House, 2015). For faculty in systems that rely on student evaluations for promotion and tenure evaluation, teaching an introductory course is high risk. This raised the question: how do we encourage faculty to teach the introductory course?

Most graduate programs provide minimal training in course design and teaching, and even fewer provide training with an emphasis on access and

inclusion. Access and inclusion is important to Justice Studies faculty but may require significant shifts in traditional teaching methods and ways of thinking about learning. Equity issues also factor into the equation; for example, faculty may be compensated at different levels, and may be experiencing various things in their lives that demand additional time and labor. Other factors, such as gender, race, disability, and social class also impact faculty bandwidth, including the invisible workload of women and marginalized faculty (Reid, 2021). This led to an additional question: how do we support faculty commitment to inclusive pedagogical practices without making large demands on their (often disproportionately) limited time?

We sought to design an equitable teaching and learning experience that addresses the barriers of gateway courses while also meeting our enrollment responsibilities. We also needed to encourage faculty interest in both teaching the course and adopting the values of justice studies pedagogy. In the next section, we provide some background on the justice studies discipline, which constitutes the content of our introductory course.

Justice Studies as a Discipline

While the Department of Justice Studies has some unique features, it is grounded on centuries-old theoretical and philosophical traditions, and decades-old disciplinary ones. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, professional organizations such as the Peace and Justice Studies Association (PJSA) and the Justice Studies Association (JSA) were founded to bring together scholars and practitioners working on justice. The first JSA conference was hosted in 1997. JSA launched *Contemporary Justice Review: Issues in Criminal, Social and Restorative Justice* in 1998. The overarching 'umbrella' of justice is a very large, multi-faceted, and diverse one, bringing together a wide range of definitions and approaches to justice, some focusing on a particular aspect of justice while others adopt more holistic understandings.

Justice studies is fundamentally transdisciplinary, emerging in part from critical scholars in various disciplines who ask critical questions about oppressive institutions—including the institution of higher education (Burke, 2022). Fields from critical education, critical criminology, or critical literary studies; to area focuses such as queer studies, feminist studies, disability studies, Latin studies, Africana studies, and more ask intersecting questions about the nature of power, the role of education in addressing social issues, and opportunities to work toward liberatory structures for all. While many people were studying justice from various lenses, a discipline devoted to understanding the meaning, features, and enactment of justice is emerging.

Justice studies seeks to understand the central question, 'what is justice?'—or, as we frame it to our students, our beautiful question (Berger, 2024). In our department, several core concepts organize our inquiry into justice: standards, fairness, rights and responsibilities, and relationships. We explore justice using multifaceted and holistic approaches and embrace multiple perspectives and positionalities; we respond to changing needs and contexts; we want to transform the world into something different and better—more just.

There are many 'types' of justice (for example, disability, racial, gender, criminal, environmental, restorative, transformative, global, social, and so many more); we want to find frameworks, lenses, tools, and theories that help us understand them all as pieces of a very complex, and important, overarching idea of 'justice'. In our major, we ask students to reflect on their own personal definitions of justice, and to examine what kinds of messages and assumptions shape their understanding of and relationship with justice. As they progress through the major, students refine communication skills, exercise perspective taking, build information literacy, and engage with multiple research methodologies, all centered on the questions of justice.

Towards a Justice Studies Pedagogy

Understanding what justice studies is helps us understand the nature and values of a justice studies pedagogy. While it emerges from larger conversations and pedagogical traditions, it also synthesizes, and synergizes, many of those traditions into something new. We would argue that these separate disciplinary and pedagogical conversations and critiques should continue, but there are barriers to our opportunities to collaborate and learn from one another. A coherent—or, at least nascently coherent—justice studies pedagogy that reflects primary values of these criticisms would facilitate expanding the reach of the conversations. Creating a point of access for a justice studies pedagogy could be a powerful entry point for any teacher, in any discipline, to create classrooms that align with justice, and help us better understand and work toward justice.

Turning to the beautiful question, 'what is a justice studies pedagogy?', like Kevin Gannon (2020), we wanted our theoretical approach to be meaningful, and 'beyond sloganeering; it has to pervade our decisions as well' (p. 25). We seek to align what we teach with how we teach it; in other words, to make sure our content, pedagogy, and practice are all about justice. A justice studies pedagogy is valuable to anyone, in any discipline, seeking to center justice.

To imagine a justice studies pedagogy, we also spent time considering the barriers we, as authors, have encountered throughout our journeys in higher education, from some positions of privilege, but also of marginality. For example, our shared experiences as working-class students entering the academy of course shape our approaches to learning and to justice. As Marlene Douglas (2025) notes, 'Class has created social norms which disrespect and indignify the working-class as they navigate social structures that only support the middle and upper-classes' (p. 2). Our experiences helped fuel and strengthen our commitment to dignity and justice, including in higher education.

Our central justice studies concepts offer us a useful framework for our pedagogy and practices. Ultimately, we wanted to make sure the course allowed all students to belong and matter, to have fair opportunities for learning, to fully participate, to be treated with dignity, to have their rights upheld and to uphold each others' rights, to think carefully about their responsibilities to the community (in the classroom and beyond), and more. From our perspective, we wanted to ensure that we thought carefully about our responsibilities as instructors to create processes, learning activities, content, content delivery, and relationships that make this happen. We seek a just pedagogy, one that reflects a holistic understanding of, and a deep commitment to, justice.

Being embedded in higher education, a system designed to exclude and contain, makes liberatory and just practices challenging. We are steeped in injustices and oppressive systems. However, drawing on our concepts helped us prioritize certain features of our praxis. We also leaned into existing justice-connected pedagogies and practices: social justice education (Adams, 2023); pedagogy of justice (Loyola, 2025); universal design and disability justice (Acevedo *et al*., 2024); decolonizing pedagogies (Trinder, 2020); Indigenous pedagogy (Wildcat *et al*., 2014); anti-racist pedagogies (Blakeney, 2005), feminist pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1987); queer pedagogy (Nemi Neto, 2018); trauma-informed pedagogy (Stromberg, 2023); pedagogy of kindness (Denial, 2025); and many more anti-oppressive, justice-centered traditions. Our transdisciplinarity shapes our content, pedagogy, and practice. We draw on a range of traditions, ways of knowing, pedagogies, and approaches to teaching, putting justice at the forefront of our considerations.

Values and Praxis

In this section, we identify some of the specific values and features that undergird a justice studies pedagogy, as well as some of the many theoretical and pedagogical traditions that inform it. We also explore specific practices that we use to enact our values. Note that while we use

practices as examples of specific values, many practices overlap and align with multiple values.

Relationships

A justice studies pedagogy values relationship-rich education (Felten and Labert, 2020) and human-centered learning (Saveri, Prince, and Romero, 2020). Relationships are a central concept not only to understanding justice, but also to the human experience. In our 'Justice Studies Concepts' document, collectively authored by Department faculty (2025), we identify that 'Justice is fundamentally about relationships or connections—the ways we are bound together and are implicated in issues of justice. [...] Injustice often has to do with violations of relationships and failing to exercise empathy and compassion for each other'. We also identify deep connections to responsibilities: what do we owe each other? We are drawn to the opportunities and questions human-centered education poses, including:

> If society viewed comprehensive human development and well-being for all stakeholders as being core priorities of educational systems and structures, what new possibilities might we have for realizing a more life-affirming social infrastructure that supports the well-being and flourishing of all learners, educators, societies and the planet? (Saveri, Prince, and Romero, 2020, p. 5)

One way we centered humans and care in the course was opting to use an asynchronous hybrid modality for the course. Students would engage with materials each day of the course but would only meet in the classroom once or twice a week. Our motivations were multifaceted. As discussed above, one goal of the redesign was to increase and diversify the faculty teaching the course. Hybrid modality courses are attractive to faculty members looking for greater flexibility in their teaching schedules, so it helped recruit faculty to the teaching rotation. Likewise, for students, having the flexibility of some asynchronous learning maximized the benefits of both modalities: the flexibility and customizability of asynchronous content learning, with opportunities to build community in the classroom and engage with each other in multiple modalities. It also helped us build in reflection days, well-being days, and other ways to recognize that being in the classroom three hours a week is a challenge for many bodyminds—students and faculty alike.

We also needed to lower the course preparation costs to recruit more faculty into the rotation. Curating materials, creating assignments, organizing the course LMS site, and other preparation tasks require significant time and energy before the students even arrive. Ideally, alternating faculty teach this course is taught once an academic year, so

we cannot ask them to do a brand-new course preparation every year. To meet this goal, we built a shell course in our learning management system. The shell course features syllabi examples, content pages, video lectures, readings, assignments, rubrics, in-class activity plans, and other materials that can be imported into official course sites. This also allows faculty who are not formally teaching the course to be present in the course by preparing lecture videos and content materials. Students can 'meet' the various faculty in the Department through the introductory course, which can help close the achievement gap for marginalized students (Fairlie, Hoffman, and Oreopoulos, 2014) and help students identify faculty with shared research interests. The shell course also allows us to update the course as needed. For example, as Generative AI has emerged as a force in higher education, we created course content highlighting the various justice implications of GenAI and designed learning activities asking students to adopt the perspective of various stakeholders.

Equity-minded Teaching

Also at the core of justice studies pedagogy are equity and equity-minded teaching, which Artze-Vega and colleagues (2023) define as 'teaching practices that strive to realize equal outcomes among all students' (p. xvii). We actively work to address differences in preparation, background, access to resources, and other learner differences that might impact learning. According to the Rawls' Difference Principle (Rawls, 1971, p. 302), the most just arrangements are those that benefit the least advantaged. Likewise, with learning, processes and practices that support marginalized students are good for all students—equitable and inclusive teaching is good teaching (Addy *et al.,* 2021, p. 7). One way to address equity is through Universal Design for Learning, which fundamentally shaped our approach: for a classroom to be just, it must factor in a wide variety of learner needs, have room for learning, including through error; and must offer a multiple means of representation, engagement, and action and expression (CAST, 2024).

Transparency

Relatedly, transparency (Winkelmes, 2026) is another value of justice studies pedagogy; we actively sought to unearth the hidden curriculum, explaining what we value and why (Gannon, 2020, p. 32), detailing processes, and aligning our learning activities with clear student learning objectives. Recognizing that historically advantaged students have access to resources and preparations that other students may not have, we actively work to make sure all students have equitable access to learning in our classrooms. While this is also a journey rather than a measurable objective, it is a worthwhile and essential one.

Our redesign focused on lowering barriers and increasing transparency for faculty and students alike. When a faculty member joins the rotation for the first time, they co-teach the course with an experienced instructor. This allows for an orientation to the shell course and builds norms around our universal design inclusion efforts. Instructors get to ask questions and learn the 'why' behind decisions made before they joined the course. The shell course also hosts a collaborative reflective journal where instructors can share successes, challenges, and concerns from their experiences to ensure the course continues to meet the objectives and needs of students, faculty, and the department. Another feature of the shell course is that it provides flexibility to instructors to select the materials that align with their research interests and strengths as well as student needs. For example, in a section of the course that exclusively serves first-year students, the instructor opts to add additional workshops to the course to build 'college skills' and to connect students with campus resources that they may not be familiar with. This addresses the fact that students' pre-college educational experiences vary and provides a more equitable opportunity for learning and academic success.

The hybrid modality and shell course allow for materials that improve accessibility and inclusion. Importantly, the course materials are zero-cost for students. The Education Data Initiative reports that the average U.S. college student pays $340 for course materials per academic year and 63% of college students reported not buying textbooks because they were too expensive (Hanson, 2026). By providing all materials through our course learning management system, we ensure all students have access to the materials needed for success. We are also able to run all materials through accessibility checks. For academic journal articles, we intentionally send students to library databases to locate the articles. This provides students with practice finding academic research while also ensuring that students are accessing the most up-to-date version of the material. We were also intentional in diversifying course materials. Academic journal articles are assigned alongside news and magazine articles, websites, podcast episodes, documentaries, and other resources. We worked to include a wide range of voices, perspectives, and identities in the material as well, to fully represent and honor the diversity of justice studies itself, in line with inclusive teaching practice (Addy *et al.*, 2021, pp. 111-112). The shell course features dozens of lecture videos created by Justice Studies faculty, but in alignment with research findings in digital education, no lecture video exceeds 10 minutes in length and all include a transcript, in order to support student engagement (Yu and Gao, 2022; Zhu *et al*., 2022).

The syllabus is an especially important document in living out our values of relationship, equity, and transparency; as Catherine Denial (2025)

argues, 'Justice is central to the work of constructing a syllabus' (p. 48). As the entry point to the course, the syllabus is an opportunity to engage students and build relationships. We worked to create a warm, inviting tone; to use accessible formatting such as using headings and bullet points; to include resources such as basic needs and learning support; and to expose as much as possible of the hidden curriculum, including by explaining the policies clearly, but also explaining why the policies are in place. For example, in discussing due dates, we talked about how due dates support fairness, professional development, and time management for students. In discussing academic integrity, we linked it to course content, including fairness to students themselves, who are indeed the ones cheated out of learning opportunities if they engage in academic dishonesty. The course syllabus, then, is not a nugatory document, but rather a living one essential to learning.

In addition to ensuring course materials align with justice studies pedagogy, we wanted to ensure that students had the opportunity to demonstrate their learning through a variety of assessment materials. Beyond being a universal design practice, this also allows students to become familiar with the various assessment mechanisms they will encounter as they progress through the major. Assignment descriptions are transparent about the goals of the assessment to help students connect with the hidden 'why' behind their instructor choices. There are four exams in the course, but the lowest exam grade is dropped from the final course grade. The course offers many lower stake assignments (in and out of class) that build student skills before they are asked to do them in a higher stakes assignment. All of these features helped make our course more accessible and, we hope, equitable.

Meaningful

We also strive for the learning that happens in the course to be meaningful. We want students to be able to apply their work to a wide range of contexts. In designing the course, we focused on 'beautiful questions' as an organizing tool for our inquiry. That is, rather than thinking about specific content we wanted students to obtain, we used backward design (MIT, 2026) and thought about what we wanted them to be able to do, think, feel, or know differently when they left the course. We also focused on real-world problem solving. For example, the final project in the course is scaffolded into three related assignments. For this project, students must identify a local injustice (on campus or in our community), research it, and propose a solution that could be adopted by a local stakeholder. The student is encouraged to choose a topic that is of interest to them (Harrington, 2024). The scaffolded approach allows the student to demonstrate the learning process and provides multiple intervention and feedback points for increased learning. The final

submission is described as a deliverable that could be presented to the targeted stakeholder explaining their solution. The medium for the deliverable is open for students to select what is most appropriate for their target audience. Students have created infographics, pamphlets, and social media campaigns to reach fellow students, recorded presentations to give to city council or the university's governing board, and created websites to connect audiences to resources and opportunities. All student submissions must be accessible and include references and a transcript. UDL was present not only in our design, but also part of what students learned to practice in the course.

Transformative

Another core value of our praxis was a focus on transformative and high-impact learning practices (AAC&U, 2026). We fundamentally want to disrupt the assumptions and definitions (often simplistic ones) students bring about justice, with the hope that they emerge from the course with more nuanced, inclusive, and holistic understandings of justice. This kind of growth often means discomfort for learners in the course. The course can be unsettling and challenging (intellectually and emotionally), for a wide variety of reasons, and we want students to embrace that discomfort. We model this ourselves by talking about our own learning journeys with students. While it is not possible in this course to use direct community-engaged learning because of the already high faculty and student workload and other factors, many of the activities in the class require students to engage with real-world issues, in the local and global communities. We want students to develop ways of thinking about and approaching issues and equip them with potential tools for addressing them in the future. We help them understand why and how to make positive change, using frameworks drawn from projects such as Teaching Social Action (2026). A key part of this is helping them understand their privileges and responsibilities as college students.

We also encourage students to develop skills around empathy and perspective-taking, using processes such as constructive dialogue designed to support students in understanding their values and assumptions, as well as those of others. Rapanta and colleagues (2020) note that dialogue activities reveal multiple perspectives that allow participants to build 'the ability to reflect on, evaluate, challenge and compare them against other perspectives' (p. 479). Critical realism is introduced to the students as a key justice studies concept that asks them to consider that all knowledge is partial and contingent and that any perspective can be valid, although some may lack evidence and require skepticism.

Another way we engage with perspective-taking is through an ethical reasoning framework called the 8 Key Questions to help students work through various ethical decision-making processes (Ethical Reasoning in Action, 2018). During one role-playing simulation, students are asked to explore an ethical decision-making scenario while occupying various roles. This allows them to understand an ethically complicated situation through various perspectives. As faculty, we, too, engage in continual perspective-taking, and actively work to understand the perspectives of our students—including understanding that our students bring diverse identities, backgrounds, and stories.

In redesigning our introductory course, we also actively worked to interrogate our own identities, backgrounds, stories, and assumptions, part of another essential value for us: reflective and reflexive practice, which we discuss in the next section.

Reflections

We offer reflections on our process of redesigning our course, and building a pedagogy of justice studies, to support other faculty engaging in similar processes. One of the first is to encourage the act of reflection itself. Critical reflection is an important part of justice: taking time to think about the lessons learned, the opportunities for growth, and the ways we continue to seek to do and be better. Much as Dolmage (2017) frames Universal Design as 'a process and mode of becoming' (p. 38), justice is inherently a process to work toward, a goal, and a way of being in the world.

Process matters, and process can be a form of resistance. We have taken time to reflect at every stage of the course re-design process, from the start to each iteration of the course, to this very act of writing about this work. At every point, we have had to be willing to ask what worked, what did not, and what we need to do to continue the hard and urgent work of teaching in just ways. We suggest building in time for metaconversations to check in on the experiences and perspectives of all involved in the learning process, which might include colleagues, advisors, administrators, and of course students.

Reflection also involves continually thinking about who and what might be missing: from our curriculum, our processes, and our classrooms. For example, in talking about disability justice, it is important to consider that there remain many barriers to higher education for all disabled students, but particularly intellectually disabled ones (O'Callaghan, 2025). We actively work to understand, challenge, and transform power and privilege, and to strive toward equity. Doing so requires continual

processes of examination, some of which can be discomforting. Discomfort is often a necessary and important part of change.

For those seeking to align their own work with a pedagogy of justice, building in ample time and respect for process, highlighting reflection, spending time with discomfort and providing opportunities for students and faculty alike to process thoughts and feelings are all crucial. It is essential to examine our intersecting identities and positionalities, and how those shape our assumptions, values, and perspectives. Reflection requires recognition of power and privilege, perspective-taking, and a willingness to have difficult conversations and do the internal work of anti-oppression (Chan and Mak, 2020).

While critical reflection is key, so is the reminder that justice, and our understanding of it, is always partial, contingent, and contextual, and continually evolving. No matter how we strive toward justice, we will need to continue to grow and learn, to respond to changing contexts, and to imagine something more. Having intellectual and personal humility, and extending care and compassion to ourselves, proves crucial. Making mistakes and failing is part of the learning process, and even the best attempts to remove barriers will leave some there, and even create new ones.

We are humans teaching other humans. And, especially in these challenging times, we may be just struggling to get by. Just as we are in a time of faculty burnout (Pope-Ruark, 2022), we are also in an age of student disengagement, and even what some call 'militant apathy' (McMurtrie, 2023). Any one course we design, even if we made our best effort for it to be a just one, is just a small part of a student and human experience. At the same time, adrienne maree brown (2018) reminds us that 'small is all': even though we can't instantly change the world, we can make a powerful difference in the small circles and spaces we are in, together.

Engaging in this process together was also part of the power. Collaborative co-design and co-teaching allows us to expand and diversify the perspectives we offer, especially important in justice-centered courses (Shuman and Songster, 2023). Though collaborative teaching can be more challenging, it is also a remarkable learning opportunity. Like our students, we often need to be outside our comfort zones to learn. Together we can challenge ourselves to do and bring our best to the classroom. It also provides built-in connection, care, and support. Being able to reflect together, and be human together, is an important part of a justice studies pedagogy. Breaking boundaries and silos can make teaching less lonely.

Collaboration can also build in accountability: alone in the classroom, we make choices; designing together challenges us to expose and articulate the reasons for the choices we make, which offers another opportunity to reflect on whether the decisions are just. Along with that, though, comes the possibility of conflict. Going into the process with proactive processes and strategies for communication, conflict resolution, and ways to restore and repair harm helped. But ultimately there may still be moments where people don't feel heard, valued, or respected. There may be frustrations and annoyances and even snapping points. Higher education structures and cultures, built on exclusion and competition, can flare conflict. But as our late colleague Terry Beitzel argued, conflict can be an opportunity, and 'we can dissent in very positive ways' (Beitzel, 2019, 37:48). By holding different viewpoints, we can learn from each other, benefit from having multiple perspectives and voices, and better understand complex issues. Teaching justice, and teaching justly, requires continual attention to power structures, and resistance to them. Embracing interdependence, an important feature of disability justice, is central to a justice studies pedagogy, with relationship and care at the center.

That said, as we reflect on this experience, we note differences in the levels of faculty participation and investment, even within our small department. In reflecting, our measures of success won't always be immediate, or measurable. Teaching is an investment in the future, one that remains uncertain. Teaching justly can be a mode of becoming, a way of knowing, an opportunity for transformation, a hope—radical hope—for the future.

We emphasize, too, that collaboration can take many shapes; it does not necessarily require two faculty members to co-teach a course at the same time. There are many ways to support interdisciplinary collaborations about teaching: have conversations about teaching; co-design content; share ideas; articulate purposes and goals; and more, including through such structures as asynchronous communication, teaching triangles, and faculty communities of practice, such as the Imagining Just Futures collaboration at our institution (York *et al*., 2024).

Truly embracing a justice studies pedagogy, and striving to create more just classrooms, requires labor of all varieties. It requires investment. One key takeaway we learned was to ask for resources. Scarcity mindset and corporate cultures pressure us to fall into the 'do more with less' mode of being. Reject that. Milton Wendland (2026) reminds us that a pedagogy of care must be a sustainable one that doesn't replicate inequities by requiring individual sacrifice; rather, it demands institutional responsibility for care. For example, our college and department provided funding at multiple steps in the process to account for the additional work of redesigning the course, creating content packages, and other work related

to the redesign. Justice is worth the investment. However, we also recognize that particularly in a time of public distrust in higher education, vast changes in higher education, challenges to education from the U.S. federal government (especially around diversity, equity, and inclusion), and other crises, sometimes we need help advocating for resources. Ultimately, we need institutions that value justice and justice studies pedagogy; that invest in it, and the people doing this work; that create caring structures to support well-being so that we can engage in this challenging but meaningful work (McClure, 2025).

Conclusion

This paper featured the application of a developing justice studies pedagogy to an introductory course for a justice studies major. It centered the justice studies discipline and articulated pedagogical objectives and values while providing examples of their application. In reflection, we offered insights from our own experiences that we hope can help guide others with shared challenges and objectives. While of course imperfect, we do emphasize the value of this kind of (re)design process: of careful considerations of justice in what and how we teach. Only through that kind of (sometimes exhausting, sometimes messy, always urgent) work can we truly create more just futures.

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