Left on Read: Feeling Unseen and Unheard in Higher Education

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When someone is "left on read" their message has been received without acknowledgement; this is typically used on instant messaging via mobile applications and social media, where people engage in instantaneous dialogue. In light of online social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #BlackInTheIvory, and #BlackInTheOffice, the call for racial equity in higher education, online, and wider society has been loud, visible, persistent, and clear. So, why are universities leaving our pleas for equity on read?

Universities are failing to engage in and facilitate open and transparent dialogue and as such, "the voices of both teachers and students are being squeezed out"[50]. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement mobilized online spaces[51] and instigated public dialogue that called for social change to address racial inequality in a historical and contemporary context. The Black Lives Matter hashtag (#BLM) drew attention to political issues and influenced public discourse, contributing to the uptake of anti-racist terminology in online spaces. Universities may share empty slogans, publicize annual statements, and display seasonal profile pictures but these offer nothing more than "symmetrical communication"[52].

When universities engage in acts of corporate political activity, at best they may raise awareness of an issue; however, they are often simply signifying that they have an awareness of something as symbolic. In this sense, universities are working to manufacture a sense of shared meaning. One example is the hasty construction of "diversified" or "decolonized" reading lists as a remedy or "fix" for past and present harm.

Failure to accept, acknowledge, and recognize the impact of harm enacted by the university on our experiences historically and at present shows a lack of willingness to engage with another in transparent dialogue. One does not have to be the same, or in agreement with, another to acknowledge and listen to them; but when we listen, we should try to understand another's view and recognize their worth[53]. So, even if the university disagrees that #BlackLivesMatter or #RhodesMustFall, what is their excuse for *choosing* not to listen to our calls?

Technical listening is pragmatic and serves a purpose[54] but to listen to another openly, one should not expect the act of listening to reach certainty or closure. Listening could also be about attuning to silence[55]; it could be appreciated as more than "giving" a voice but perhaps about amplifying silences. It is often in the disconnect between two people that learning takes place[56]; and for many, that disconnection results in silence and/or silencing. We must consider how and why environments prohibit people from speaking up and speaking out in ways that restrict authentic dialogue and mutual understanding. People need to feel psychologically safe before they can speak up, but further still, speaking up does not ensure that someone will feel heard[57].

We need to acknowledge what Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) describe as "oblivious or hostile contexts" as a barrier to being present, fostering authentic connections, and feeling safe in educational spaces. To be present is to respond with compassion; to pay attention to "the affective and cognitive interactions" that are "the very elements of classroom practice that are threatened by the current educational trends"[58]. To be present in education, teachers need to be self-aware and connected to students[59]. As it stands, the university is so busy distracting students and teachers with equality metrics and standardized curricula that separate them from being present and listening. We should all collectively tune in to what or even who is supporting that disconnection. Moving forward, we should expect the dialogue that we deserve; we must demand that decision-makers and policymakers are present, so that we can be present in these spaces too, rather than physically visible but absent-minded.

We need to work on our ability to see and hear people, beyond "the patronising and superficial pluralism of the social inclusion agenda"[60] to recognize where, when, how, and why someone may feel included *and* excluded at the same time[61]. Non-reciprocal extraction of epistemic labour is exploitative, especially when this primarily alleviates guilt or responsibility without the dismantling of systems of power[62]. What kind of message does the university send when they offer Amazon vouchers in exchange that we document our concerns and fears in focus groups and culture surveys? When someone is invited to "fix" something or to develop resolutions, that is not facilitating open dialogue.

To call upon another is to direct them, but to listen is to be directed[63]. In the university, there often is an expectation that people

should share their experiences of inequality so that another person can learn about them. This is one-sided and suggests that listening in this sense should be purposeful for another. It is vital, that racialized people are not called upon to share their experiences of inequality, and their feelings as quantifiable currency in the drive for "racial equality". For some, appointed "safe" spaces become "courtrooms", where people have to justify, evidence, show, and prove their experiences of inequality[64]. So, perhaps the university offers spaces where people can *technically* be listened to; but who can say they really feel seen and heard?

People may feel seen when they feel that their worth has been recognized[65], and may feel

heard when their ideas and questions are recognized and responded to[66]. Further still, we need to tune in to when and where people feel "seen and understood, not just emotionally but cognitively, physically and even spiritually"[67]. We know that being seen in higher education is important because universities spend substantial amounts of money building statues, fixing plaques, and hanging pictures of historical figures. Working to enable people to feel heard is not simple but requires humility in inquiry and transparency in decision-making processes to ensure that "leaders may be able to say yes a bit more and to say no better"[68]. If those who hold decision-making power in higher education were truly open and transparent about their wishes, aspirations, goals, targets, and plans of action, would we really want to offer our voice as a contribution to the change *they* want to see?

Paolo Freire (1967) encouraged us to change the structures that impede dialogue, but we often forget to re-imagine the *absence* of a structure, rather than a rebuilt or repurposed one. There is an emphasis on the university as the ultimate goal, the ideal structure, that people need support to access and participate in equally for the betterment of society. To work toward "equality" in existing systems pushes for the redistribution of power in ways that maintain the status quo; without dismantling the very power relations that exclude people physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually[69].

Distributive equality is concerned with deciding the most appropriate currency of equali-

ty, with less emphasis on why people need access to currency or how that currency serves existing power relations[70]. In higher education, the push for distributive equality positions high grades and high-income careers as currency; this feeds into deficit narratives that mobilize differences in the way that grades are awarded, and labour is paid. Inequalities in the distribution of "currency" in education and employment are individualized, repackaged, and represented as "attainment" and "earning" gaps at the individual level.

When we name equality as "gender equality" or "race equality", we are putting conditions on it. When we describe efforts toward equality as for people grouped by gender or race, we are describing who currency gets to be distributed amongst. Further still, how do we acknowledge racial equality and how do we know it has been achieved? If we try to make equality visible, we might consider the number of students and staff who can be categorized as belonging to a gendered or racialized group. Except viewing equality as a visible "thing", to turn it into a quantifiable currency, completely disregards it as an experience and something *felt*. So, when someone is invited into a space to talk about their experiences of race, racialization, and racism, who *feels* the benefit?

Changing narratives alone will not result in structural change. "Equality, Diversity and Inclusion" (EDI) discourse prioritizes equal access to an existing system, in this case, the university. But, what *else* beyond academia might we aspire to instead; what *else* do we deserve? Telling people that they are "safe" to speak in designated spaces creates only a superficial sense of safety. Just because someone has been placed, or "included" on a panel does not mean they will be able to speak up and speak out. Just because someone has been appointed a seat at the table, does not mean that they will feel a sense of belonging in that space. We also need to remember that to feel *included* is not the same as feeling like you belong; to *belong* is to feel an affinity for a space or place. What we need is for people to try and *listen* to the university as a space and place and attune to when and where silences occur.

We so often encounter silence and silencing in universities, that we are pushed to feel unseen and unheard. If universities listen to what *is* being said, people are being open and transparent about their wishes, aspirations, goals, targets, and plans of action. Students are voicing their concerns; they have affirmed that #BlackLivesMatter, proclaimed that #RhodesMustFall, demanded that universities #DecolonizeTheCurriculum, and have driven participation in #RentStrikes. Teachers are voicing their concerns; they are disclosing why they are #LeavingAcademia and they are sustaining participation in #FourFights. Yet, for some reason still, the university thinks it is okay for us all to be left on read.