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Teaching the Anthropology of Addiction and Cultivating Hope: Critical Pedagogy in an Era of Erasure

Allison V. Schlosser
University of Nebraska Omaha, United States

Abstract
Teaching the anthropology of topics often considered controversial, such as "addiction" and the structural inequalities that shape it, is becoming increasingly challenging in the current climate of higher education in the United States. Neoliberal imperatives and threats to academic freedom, particularly in politically conservative states, have hindered the ability of teachers and students to engage in open conversations about social problems in classrooms, undermining public education's democratic mission. This essay explores how teaching anthropology using a critical pedagogical approach provides an opportunity to cultivate critical and transformative hope, resisting threats to our ability to foster engaged citizenship among students.

Keywords
Student empowerment; critical pedagogy; pedagogies of hope; academic freedom; addiction

Introduction

The United States is contending with multiple intersecting crises. Political polarization and challenges to democratic institutions such as public higher education has created a climate of fear of teaching critically important health and social issues (Quinn, 2024). Topics ranging from the efficacy of public health interventions to the structural underpinnings of racial inequalities are now often considered controversial, and those who research and teach these topics face heightened threats to their academic freedom. These challenges are occurring alongside a now decades-long drug crisis that has resulted in nearly 110,000 overdose deaths in the United States (U.S.) in 2022 alone (Spencer et al., 2024), devastating individuals, families, and communities. Meanwhile, neoliberal political-economic shifts have led to a market-driven transformation of higher education, reorienting universities toward profitability and diminishing the status of disciplines that cultivate critical thinking, social responsibility, and collective imagination. This undercuts the potential of higher education to foster socially conscious, engaged citizenship among students (Giroux, 2024).

This essay explores teaching the anthropology of drug use and "addiction"[1] using a critical pedagogical approach in this fraught socio-political-economic context. Drawing on my experiences teaching at a public metropolitan university in a conservative state in the Central Plains region of the U.S., I reflect on the importance of fostering critical and transformative hope among students (Webb, 2013). I argue that teaching the anthropology of these politically fraught topics has potential to protect against threats to the democratic function of public universities. As Jennifer Rich (2021) stresses, facilitating conversations about politics and social problems is fundamental to students' development as participatory citizens in a democracy.

Furthermore, I stress that teaching the anthropology of drug use and addiction using critical pedagogies is of heightened importance for students whose communities are most closely affected by stigma and discrimination related to drug use. Many of the students who enrol in my courses on these topics are motivated to do so because of their personal connection to drug problems in their families and communities. These students are deeply invested in understanding these issues in their full complexity but are often silenced in discussing them

[1] Here, the word "addiction" is placed in quotations marks to communicate that it is a fluid, culturally-constructed concept with no single meaning (Raikhel & Garriott, 2013).

due to the stigma associated with them and fear of openly discussing challenging, often politically-charged, social issues in classrooms. I argue that, for these students, teaching about issues of urgent importance to their lives using critical pedagogies of hope has the potential to create a "radical space of possibility" (hooks, 1994, p. 12). Such spaces empower marginalized students to be active agents of change (McKinson, 2022). The open conversations that take place in such educational spaces have the potential to "build trust, form connections, and reinforce the value of community" (Rich, 2021, p. 8) among students who might rarely experience such supportive educational environments.

These educational communities are especially important for learning about drug use and addiction as stigma limits open dialogue about these topics (Corrigan & Nieweglowski, 2018), threatening to silence discussion of these issues. This silencing, however, is not limited to education on drug use and addiction but extends to the myriad other pressing contemporary crises, including migration, climate change, reproductive freedom, and war, that have become politically contentious. Thus, the need to consider how we support students in understanding, discussing, and responding to these issues has implications far beyond my specific topic area.

Higher Education's Democratic Mission Under Threat

Neoliberal Transformations

The democratic mission of higher education has been increasingly threatened by the growing influence of neoliberal logics on educational institutions. Market-driven models rooted in profitability are shaping education at colleges and universities across the U.S. and around the globe (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). As colleges and universities apply neoliberal logics to their institutions, efficiency and profitability have become priorities. Departments and programs in the humanities and liberal arts, including anthropology, are especially vulnerable to de-funding in the name of cost-savings, leaving educators in these programs on perpetual edge (Jobson, 2020).

This market transformation has shaped educational goals and program offerings as the meaning of higher education is increasingly directed toward the promise of stable careers and personal economic gain. In this context, the model of the "student-as-customer" had taken hold (Mintz, 2021), privileging narrow career goals over broader educational aims of critical thinking, creativity, and social responsibility. As educational scholar Henry Giroux (2024) stresses, this transformation "reduces learning to mere careerism, undermining the university's potential to cultivate engaged, socially conscious citizens" (para. 2). These changes steer education away from collective issues, ethical debates, and democratic participation, depriving students of essential tools to "challenge injustice or envision a more equitable society" (Giroux, 2024, para. 4). These shifts are clear in my home state of Nebraska, where public funding for its state universities has progressively diminished, leading to a significant budget shortfall (Wendling, 2023).

Threats to Academic Freedom

Political challenges to academic freedom join these neoliberal shifts in threatening higher education's democratic mission. Across the U.S., politicians have introduced, and at times passed, legislation that limits what instructors can teach in their classrooms (PEN America, 2023). Centres, programs, and courses related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (D.E.I.) have been under particularly vehement attack. This has occurred most prominently in the state of Florida (see the essay by Shana Harris in this issue). In Nebraska, similar proposals have been made but voted down, yet efforts to bar public funding for D.E.I. initiatives and content continue (Sanderford, 2024). In August 2024, the University of Nebraska Lincoln, the state's flagship university, dissolved its Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the University of Nebraska Omaha closed its Gender and Sexuality Resource Centre and its Office of Multicultural Affairs, shifts that leadership framed as part of a broader university reorganization but many suspected were to avoid political backlash against diversity programming (Wendling, 2024). Moreover, state legislative proposals to end or change tenure for faculty are being introduced across the U.S. (Quinn, 2024). In Nebraska, bills were recently introduced that would have eliminated tenure at the state's public colleges and universities (Salinas II, 2025).

Together, these shifts may threaten academic freedom by discouraging, and possibly suppressing, research and teaching related to diversity and structural inequalities, topics central to the discipline of anthropology. A recent survey of faculty members at public and private colleges and universities found that over 40 percent reported that their sense of academic freedom in teaching declined in the last year (Quinn, 2024) and another survey suggests that faculty feel increasingly constrained in what they discuss in their teaching (Quinn, 2025). These

challenges to academic freedom and their chilling effect on scholars have made for tense classrooms in which instructors and students alike may avoid discussing pressing social issues for fear of reprimand.

Intersecting Erasures

When teaching the anthropology of addiction, threats to academic freedom and their chilling effect on discussions of "controversial" topics intersect with the silencing of drug problems, particularly in the political climate in the Central Plains region of the U.S. where I teach. Teaching the anthropology of drug use and addiction demands attention to underlying systemic inequalities rooted in multiple forms of oppression, most prominently racial discrimination (Mendoza et al., 2019). This lens places my teaching squarely in the radar of those who wish to silence discussions of systemic inequalities. Moreover, Nebraska is a state where little research on drug problems is conducted, although the limited research that exists indicates that drug use and related problems like intravenous HIV infection do indeed exist in the region and need attention (Dombrowski et al., 2016).

The students who enrol in my upper-level anthropology courses on drug use and addiction often have personal experiences with drug problems in their families and communities that refute the notion that addiction and other drug problems "don't happen here." The University of Nebraska Omaha is a metropolitan university that draws many first-generation students (approximately 35 percent in 2024) and serves a substantial population of students from racial or ethnic minoritized groups (approximately 32 percent in 2024) (University of Nebraska Omaha, 2025). I find that students from more socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds are more likely to see and experience the negative consequences of drug problems in their communities (e.g., as they may come from areas where the illicit drug economy is a more viable route to economic survival than formal low-wage employment). Instead of pushing back against discussing topics related to drug use that many deem too controversial, these students attend class eager to discuss these issues, their roots, their consequences, and, importantly, their silencing.

My students seem increasingly aware of political attempts to erase diversity and structural inequalities from their education—a form of epistemic gaslighting, or "structurally produced silencing" (Bailey, 2020, p. 670). Students tell me that in many of their courses, they do not feel they can speak openly about the experiences and issues of greatest importance to their lives. Many students who take my courses are pre-health professions majors, and they often explain that the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) courses they previously took were lecture-based and grounded in an objectivist model of knowledge, offering little opportunity for discussion and consideration of their lived experiences. Additionally, increasing course sizes and threats to academic freedom, together with fear of negative feedback from their students, may dissuade faculty from structuring their courses based on discussion of students' lived experiences. Faculty may fear that this could lead to conversations about topics, such as diversity and inequality, now framed as "controversial" in higher education. This reflects the broader lack of opportunity for people with different backgrounds and views to discuss social issues in a highly politically polarized society, making it even more challenging for teachers to facilitate these discussions and for students to openly engage in them (Rich, 2021). This erasure impedes not only discussion of pressing issues, but it also limits our ability to respond to them. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016) stressed, "if there's no name for a problem, you can't see it. If you can't see it, you can't solve it."

Yet in my anthropology of drug use and addiction courses, students are suddenly encouraged to discuss what, at times, seems all around them: the roommate who overdosed on a fentanyl-adulterated Adderall pill they took in an attempt to study through the night; the brother who uses drugs to self-medicate schizophrenia when he does not have access to health care; the best friend who deals drugs to support his family; the young woman who stopped drinking to avoid the same fate of her father who struggled with alcoholism, and the student in recovery valiantly working to pursue higher education despite the barriers presented by her felony record. Resurrecting these issues from silence and placing them in the contexts of broader socio-political-economic structures and cultural beliefs and practices is a key aim of my teaching. But it seems woefully inadequate to bring these experiences to light without collaborating with students to envision a way forward with hope in the ability to both critique and make positive change in the world.

Teaching Hope Through Crises

In stressing the importance of education as an engine of democracy, Giroux (2024) highlights the need to teach students to "see that democracy cannot sustain itself passively; it demands an active, vigilant defense" (para. 9).

Critical pedagogical approaches that teach educated hope advance a broad model of active citizenship, countering the narrow goals of education shaped by neoliberalism. Thus, educated hope is

> [C]ommitted to producing young people capable and willing to expand and deepen their sense of themselves, to think of the "world" critically, to imagine something beyond their own self-interest and well-being, to serve the public good, take risks, and struggle for a substantive democracy. (Giroux, 2019, p. 150)

In my teaching on the anthropology of drug use and addiction, I focus on cultivating both critical and transformative hope, forms of hope essential to educating active democratic citizens who can both envision and act toward a better future. While critical hope cultivates criticism of oppressive conditions, transformative hope fosters visions of alternative conditions and confidence that they can be made possible by the powers of human agency (Webb, 2013, p. 409). Taken together, these two forms of hope foster the ability of teachers and students to confront painful histories of oppression, but then to strive toward building better worlds.

Cultivating Critical Hope: Accompanying Students Through Witnessing

Cultivating critical hope is central to teaching the anthropology of topics that are structurally silenced, such as drug use and addiction, but relevant to students' lived experiences. It involves "a process of 'excavating'—by means of a critical interrogation of the student voice—these hidden and submerged desires and longings (. . .) The educator thus taps into the sense that 'something's missing' to uncover the future-oriented longings that stimulate a critical engagement with the present" (Webb, 2013, p. 403). This allows students to see, and confront, what is hidden in society due to stigma and structural erasure, creating new spaces of possibility. In this critical pedagogical practice, educators commit to hearing learners' voices and to imagining future possibilities, "co-creating hope" (Ichikawa, 2022, p. 389). This involves classroom dialogue rooted in the language of both critique and possibility.

In my teaching, I aim to accompany students through witnessing in a variety of forms: moral witnessing as we learn the histories of exclusion and oppression that have long shaped drug problems, compassionate witnessing as students share their experiences of how drug problems have affected their communities, and hopeful witnessing as we struggle together in imagining alternative possibilities. To accompany students through these forms of witnessing requires breaking down traditional power dynamics of classrooms and centring reflexivity. To this end, I position myself as a learner alongside students. Each semester, we use the first two days of class to discuss and agree upon principles for engaging and interacting with one another to reflect on how we will strive to treat one another and consider our prior educational experiences, beginning to foster trust and inclusion in the process. We begin with an example of agreements used in multicultural community settings[2] and from there we create our own expectations. We also break down hierarchy in the classroom by forming a circle in the room, with students addressing one another as they weekly share their growing knowledge of the historical roots and contemporary complexities of drug problems and how these issues touch their lives.

To foster not just dialogue, but witnessing, we engage in reflexivity and non-judgmental listening early in the semester. At the start of the course, each student writes a reflection about their beliefs about drug use and addiction and what influenced them, to which they return at the middle and end of the semester. Students discuss these reflections in class based on their level of comfort. Discussions take place in both small and large groups to support students with varying levels of comfort sharing personal experiences in large groups. I also share my evolving beliefs about, and experiences with, drug and addiction in my professional work and community of origin: one hard hit by the U.S. drug overdose crisis. In this way, I model self-reflexivity to normalize this practice, validating and making space for all our lived experiences. Furthermore, I use course materials that model reflexive scholarship to underscore the importance of this practice for engaged research and social change. Angela Garcia's (2010) research on drug use and historical trauma in her community of origin is one such example that students report having a lasting impact on their thinking about drug problems as both personally nuanced and structurally-shaped. Through these activities, students are supported in practicing non-judgment and curiosity of their own and others' experiences.

Students also take the lead in choosing course content, supporting them in applying anthropology to the drug issues most relevant to their lives and empowering them to take ownership of their education. Each class begins with a student leading a discussion of material related to drug use and addiction that they encountered in their

[2] I use the "Agreements for Multicultural Interactions" from the East Bay Meditation Centre as a starting place (https://eastbaymeditation.org/2022/03/agreements-for-multicultural-interactions/).

life (e.g., social media posts about drug issues). In leading discussion, students relate their chosen material to anthropological perspectives, their lived experiences, and what they see as most at stake in their communities. This exercise often leads students to identify projects most relevant to their lives and local communities that they then focus on in their culminating course project, which I describe below.

My aim is to build learning communities that seed democratic participation through collective witnessing and active engagement. Such an environment is conducive to learning since "students learn best when they feel connected, cared for, and that their perspectives are valued" (Rich, 2021, p. 83). Moreover, such a learning community supports students in taking risks when sharing their preconceptions of and lived experiences with difficult topics (Rich, 2021). The value of this approach is reflected in a group of students who joked about how our class was "so *real*." As they reflected on our discussions that semester, students expressed surprise at how they could talk about their questions about drug use, articulate and unpack stigma about addiction that they had internalized, and share their lived experiences related to drug problems. They did not have to leave their "real" lives, their "real" selves behind when they came to class.

Notably, this approach introduces risks for students and teachers alike. Teaching in this way may expose faculty to criticism in the current political climate. However, I am positioned within a department and college with leadership that values critical pedagogy and supports faculty in applying these practices. Moreover, students must feel safe in discussing stigmatized and often politically divisive issues. I support students in these vulnerable experiences not only by striving to cultivate a non-judgmental learning community and modelling self-reflexivity, but also by discussing the need to consider their personal boundaries in classroom discussions. Students are encouraged to be mindful of their physical and emotional reactions to course discussions and to reflect on the meaning of these reactions before responding. We also discuss the importance of students choosing to "pass" on a discussion topic as needed. Moreover, we collectively acknowledge when discomfort arises in discussions and unpack it as a group.

Finally, the course sometimes uncovers challenges for students related to their personal experiences with drug issues. In these cases, I mentor students in considering the boundaries of what they share in class, what they share with me, and what they keep private to protect their wellbeing. When needed, I also directly connect students with campus and community resources to provide them with support beyond my capacity as their teacher and mentor. Multiple students have noted that they would not have reached out to someone for support in these instances if they had not experienced the open discussions of drug and other social issues in class and felt safe to seek help.

Transformative Hope: Empowering Socially Engaged Citizens

Transformative hope is an essential extension of critical hope to empower students to become engaged democratic citizens. Its confidence in human agency and the power of collective imagination propels students to imagine alternative futures. This approach is especially important when working with students from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds, not uncommon in my classrooms, as hearing these students' voices and hopes for change "enables us to imagine anew the ontological possibilities of the academic margins to raise the voices of the so-called non-elite, predominantly minority, and low-income students" (McKinson, 2022, p. 379). This fuels our visions of future possibilities, with the help of key tools offered by anthropology, beyond the narrow goals of the increasingly marketized academy.

Transformative hope strives to "mobilise action around a vision of a better way of being" (Webb, 2013, p. 410). Enacting transformative hope is difficult, but it is scaffolded by the reflexivity, witnessing, and agency in learning that students practice in class from the start. Students practice transformative hope by engaging with local issues related to drug use, such as state-level drug policies and local stigma silencing drug problems, through weekly discussions and in a culminating project. This project takes a different form each semester since students choose what they believe is most important to pursue. However, the project is often centred is issues most relevant to their lives as students. For example, students recently chose to respond to their observations on the lack of education on drug overdose risk on campus by interviewing their peers about their knowledge of overdose risks, consulting with local leaders in harm reduction, and creating prevention information for students about safer substance use and overdose prevention. Another semester, students assessed the availability of naloxone, a medication that prevents opioid overdose death, in the community and distributed naloxone on campus after identifying a lack of access to it. Both projects involved collaboration with local organizations addressing health and social issues. In their course evaluations, students expressed appreciation for how hearing from their peers in

classroom discussions helped them to come to viable solutions to the problems we considered. One student commented: "getting everyone to speak up and talk about the issues helps to better understand them and find the best possible solution."

Moreover, students often continue to pursue applied projects on drug use and addiction after taking my course, reflecting their belief that not only is change needed, but that they can imagine and work toward alternative possibilities. Students often pursue independent study courses to work on projects on drug issues, they focus their capstone projects on applied drug research, and they continue to be active with local organizations addressing drug issues. After collaborating with a local harm reduction organization on several connected projects in response to students' calls for more discussion of substance use on campus, a group of students have continued to collaborate with this organization to make sure the voices of students are heard in local responses to drug issues. This reflects their development as socially engaged citizens beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

In the face of multiple threats to public higher education as an engine of democracy, including neoliberal transformations in higher education and political threats to academic freedom, and the silencing of discussions of critical health and social issues like drug use and addiction, I find hope in my classrooms. Using pedagogies that foster critical and transformative hope, students can be seen as persons with valuable lived experiences to share. They can participate in thoughtful communities that imagine better possibilities, and they can build the skills needed to become active agents of democracy. While this may seem like meagre resistance as higher education faces increasing threats to its central aims, I have seen that my students do not stop hoping, imagining, and, in the small spaces of my classrooms, beginning to build visions of alternative futures.

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