In his essay "Teaching for Social Justice: Reeducating the Emotions Through Literary Study," Mark Bracher responds to calls from scholars in composition and across the humanities to engage the politics that shape our classrooms and the world outside them through our teaching practices. Critical pedagogues have argued for some time that the classroom is a public and political site, and that if we develop students' critical consciousness—or conscientização—this will invariably lead them to analyze and "take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire 17). Scholars such as bell hooks and Andrea Greenbaum have built on Freire's model to offer "engaged" and "emancipatory" pedagogies to help us raise our students' awareness of themselves as public and political actors, and to foster in our students "identification with the oppressed [and the] the powerless" (Greenbaum xii). These and other scholars argue that English classrooms (among others) are sites for potential intervention in the institutional production of docile student bodies accepting of the status quo. Issues of social justice are not only appropriate content for an English class, they are necessary content. To believe otherwise would be to dismiss our potential impact as teachers on the beliefs and actions of our students, to disregard the extent to which we are already participating in the formation of docile student bodies accepting of the status quo, and to shrug off our responsibility to issues of social justice. Bracher offers the next logical step in our commitment to reforming our world through teaching by providing us with a blueprint for change; specifically, he offers a cognitive psychological model for reeducating our students' emotions that will help us more effectively address and "alter their social and political behaviors" (469). Current pedagogical practices that focus on logical reasoning and ideological critique, Bracher argues, fall short of addressing the underlying and often unconscious beliefs that motivate students' values and actions. In order to truly advance social justice, we need to teach our students how to become more compassionate.
Bracher defines compassion as the "realiz[ation of] the full extent to which individuals' conditions, actions, intentions, and characters are all the product of factors beyond their control" (477). This narrow formulation of compassion departs from broader characterizations offered by theorists such as Lauren Berlant, who argues that "there is nothing clear about compassion except that it implies a social relation between spectators and sufferers, with the emphasis on the spectator's experience of feeling compassion and its subsequent relation to material practice" (1). Bracher argues that compassion—as well as its opposite, indifference—are both emotions that result from our cognitive appraisal of the cause of a situation or condition, and these emotions directly affect what action we will take in response to that situation: when we encounter suffering, we are more likely to feel indifferent (and therefore to choose not to offer help) when we believe that a person has caused her/his own suffering, and we will "feel greater compassion and provide more aid when [we] perceive the cause of the other's suffering to lie outside the other's control" (474). Because compassionate feelings and actions are premised on believing that "the other is not responsible," Bracher argues that to advance social justice we must first address the cognitive frameworks or "schemas" people use to understand the causes of various social problems (475–76).

Bracher argues that we cannot change our students' behavior until we have changed their minds, and we cannot change our students' minds without changing their perceptions of the causes behind the different problems in our society. To change our students' minds, we must reeducate their cognitive causal schemas to "understand the complete array of causes of social problems, rather than simply attributing these problems to their immediate bearers or perpetrators" (479). Because his pedagogical model combines cognitive psychology and large-scale social theory, it seems well-suited to address social problems at both the "micro" and the "macro" levels; however, Bracher applies a narrow binary—"truncated" versus "comprehensive" cognitive schemas—to define and predict our different perceptions of, and emotional and behavioral responses to, the world around us. These terms do not account for the complex ways in which our individual experiences interact with public discourses in forming and reforming our causal perceptions. Bracher's
contrast of the two models creates a hierarchy between those with "comprehensive" and those with "truncated" cognitive schemas that reinforces a problematic opposition between discursive and "evidence-based" knowledge as well as privileges binaries between teacher/student and sympathizer/sufferer.

Although Bracher explains that our causal schemas "develop out of our informal and formal experience and observation," he overlooks the individual investments we may have in our causal schemas as well as the extent to which public discourses shape the experiences that form our schemas, and he provides no framework for interpreting an individual's own role in affecting is or her actions and circumstances (480). Bracher likens the relationship between experience and cognitive schemas to that of flipping a light switch and experiencing the illumination of a room: experiencing the room's illumination when we flip a light switch teaches us that the switch caused the light, and further experience (someone else flipping the switch, or a sudden power surge) further broadens our causal schema. If our schema is too narrow—if we imagine that light can only come from flipping a switch, and we fail to account for the possibility of a power surge—our causal schema is proved faulty or inadequate (480–81). Bracher's light switch example provides a basic illustration of how cognitive schemas affect our perception; however, this clear-cut example is far simpler than the majority of situations in which we rely on our cognitive schemas to "[fill] in gaps in the information available to us," in particular our perceptions of complex social problems (480). In the case of the light switch, the switch either activates the light or it does not: a simple evaluation of the wiring will determine the answer, and it is unlikely that we will have a strong personal investment either way or be swayed by strong public opinions or cultural beliefs about the likelihood that light switches will illuminate a room. However, in the case of complex social issues such as poverty, illness, and crime, it is likely that we have had varied personal experiences with these issues as well as been impacted by dominant cultural discourses.

The point of Bracher's pedagogical theory is to teach students to better recognize the dominant forces of inequality that shape their lives and the lives of others; however, the deterministic cognitive model he applies forecloses any possibility for negotiation within these forces.
Bracher’s model assumes that the power of “dominant causal schemas” is univocal and leaves no room for resistance or even recognition of what Foucault identifies as “innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of power relations” existing within any disciplinary system (Bracher 482; Foucault 27). For Bracher, there is no way to adopt a “dominant causal schema” that is not “faulty,” which creates a problematic opposition between discursive and “evidence-based” knowledge. A discursive understanding of knowledge is premised on seeing all language as ideological, yet Bracher suggests that it is just the “truncated, distorting causal schemas [that are] promulgated by American ideology” (485). According to Bracher, an “adequate” or “comprehensive” causal schema is “much more politically neutral and ethically non-coercive” because it is based on “more complete, empirically and clinically validated knowledge” (476). It is, in a sense, more logical and less ideological because “the evidence supports our understanding of responsibility, our ideology” (478). The reeducation of students’ emotions, and the success of the pedagogy that Bracher proposes, depends upon the students’ acquired abilities to select different experiences as evidence for their causal schemas: in the pedagogical examples he provides, Bracher instructs students to look past the details of the murders committed by Robert Harris or Andrea Yates and instead privilege the details of Harris’ upbringing, or Yates’ psychological vulnerabilities, in forming more adequate cognitive schemas. “Evidence” is the basis for conviction in both cases, just as it is in the case of Bigger Thomas that Bracher draws on in another example: there is no doubt in any of these cases about who committed the murders. The cognitive schema that determines the cause of the murders, then, is based not only on the presence of “evidence” or “empirically and clinically validated knowledge” but also on which knowledge is validated.

Which knowledge we validate is not a random choice. As Bracher suggests, “truncated” schemas are influenced by powerful American ideologies; similarly, the development of an “adequate” schema does not happen overnight but is instead the result of careful and systematic change of what would appear to be a preexisting and firmly held schema.
(Bracher gives no indication that anyone comes to the adequate schema naturally; although he doesn’t tell us anything about how he acquired one, he makes it clear that our students are all in need of a cognitive tune-up.) Drawing on research by Ziva Kunda, Bracher notes that “people strongly invested in a particular belief or attitude often take pains to appear objective (to themselves as well as others) by collecting facts and considering logical arguments, but doing so selectively, in ways guaranteed to support their preestablished positions” (468). Because our choice of which knowledge we validate doesn’t occur in a vacuum, it is crucial to understand the dialectical relationship between personal experiences and cognitive schemas. Not only do our personal experiences shape our cognitive schemas, but our cognitive schemas, in turn, shape our experiences.

To accept a different explanation of my experiences, I may have to work extremely hard against long-held and socially supported explanations for the events I encounter. Although Bracher neatly aligns his adequate causal schema with social justice and the truncated causal schema with social injustice, to work against social injustice I will likely have to negotiate both causal schemas, incorporating dominant and resistant discourses, in order to effect change. For example, if I want to help a close friend who is involved in an abusive relationship, when I watch her return again and again to her abusing partner I will have to resist dominant discourses and causal schemas that hold her responsible for the abuse she then suffers. My friend may believe—contrary to her own experiences in the relationship—that “things will be better this time,” but I will be able to draw this time on dominant discourses that insist “once an abuser, always an abuser.” My social justice commitment to not blaming the victims of abusive relationships defines the abuser on the basis of the balance of power in the relationship, a stance supported by evidence that leaving an abuser is often a long, slow process for the victims of abuse: victims of abuse are frequently so controlled by their abusive partner that they will leave a safe location and return to their abuser, even under the most dire and direct threats to their safety. This knowledge will cause me to hold the abuser responsible under all circumstances, and thus it maintains dominant distinctions between categories of “abuser” and “abused” that appear in Bracher’s truncated
schema, even if the abused partner retaliates against her abuser. "Empirical evidence" shows that when victims of abuse retaliate against their partners, they usually do so by catching their partner off-guard and at a time when he is not abusing them, and they usually use excessive force; for example, most women convicted of killing their abusers used a weapon when their abuser didn’t have one, and often killed him when he was asleep or by otherwise sneaking up on him. However, in order to understand such an act within the context of self-defense, I will resist dominant discourses that look only at the immediate circumstances surrounding an event; much like Bracher’s example of Bigger Thomas, I will look past the “empirically and clinically validated knowledge” of the burning bed in order to recognize the wider context of battered women’s syndrome.

Recognizing the personal investments we have in our schemas doesn’t mean we have to abandon hope in changing them; however, it does put us in a better position to recognize the complex ways in which our personal experiences interact with dominant discourses in the formation of our causal schemas. A discursive model of knowledge accounts for both psychic and material contexts for our perceptions of causality, allowing us to see both the individual potential for cognitive change and the strong social forces that pressure us to maintain dominant belief systems. In focusing on our “investments” in our causal schemas, I borrow directly from the terminology George Lipsitz uses to describe the “possessive investments in whiteness” that are responsible for the racialized hierarchies of our society (vii). Lipsitz uses the term “possessive investment” to emphasize the relationship between whiteness and asset accumulation in our society, likening the way in which white identity is maintained to the careful supervision over and devotion to resources that will in turn ensure a continuous supply of power. Lipsitz’s emphasis on the emotions and motivations that “vest” us in our belief systems shares a common goal with Bracher’s cognitive psychological model: to look beyond “conscious and deliberative individual activities” in order to understand the root causes of social injustice (Lipsitz 20). However, where he differs from Bracher is in his recognition of how social structures of racial injustice operate discursively: they shape and are also shaped by the language of our personal experiences. Lipsitz
argues that in order to disinvest ourselves from a “ruinous pathology of whiteness”—or, in Bracher’s terms, to reeducate the emotions of the indifferent—we have to “connect attitudes to interests” (Lipsitz viii). We have to see the personal investments we have in our schemas. There are certainly many people whose direct experiences with illness, unemployment, poverty, crime, or terrorism reinforce causal schemas that hold “the immediate bearers or perpetrators of these conditions as their sole or primary causes”; anyone victimized by one of these experiences is likely to hold a specific person or group of people responsible (Bracher 481).

Bracher argues that “most Americans,” particularly conservatives, have a lack of compassion for social injustice because faulty judgments of responsibility “short-circuit their perception[s] of the full battery of causes that are responsible for poverty, addiction, crime, and so on,” preventing compassion and hence social justice (479). While it may be true that conservative American ideology “foregrounds personal actions, intentions, and character and largely overlooks external, situational causes,” such causal schemas are also the basis of the majority of successful treatment programs used to rehabilitate individuals ranging from substance abusers to convicted offenders (477–78). Although these schemas are also embraced by dominant cultural discourses, participants in such treatment programs—their “immediate bearers or perpetrators”—have strong investments in foregrounding their own personal responsibility for their actions (481). The first step in Alcoholics Anonymous—admitting “I am powerless over alcohol”—requires that I accept I have a choice about my sobriety; similarly, effective prison rehabilitation programs (although increasingly scarce!) rely on a fundamental principle of providing treatment for trauma and substance abuse problems common among convicted offenders while simultaneously encouraging the offender to accept responsibility for his or her actions. Such causal schemas are also central to activist rhetorics employed by populations ranging from the ill to the poor: although taking action to change these conditions may include challenging established notions that people living with AIDS or in poverty are to blame for their circumstances, it also requires people affected by these issues to believe that they can prevent or change these conditions.
In overlooking the personal investments we may have in adopting dominant, as well as resistant, cognitive schemas, Bracher provides no conceptualization of agency outside of fully adopting a “comprehensive” causal schema. Bracher’s model targets not only students who are inactive or disconnected from issues of social justice, but also students who are already engaged in and identified with issues affecting the world around them by actively “supporting political candidates and policies that are indifferent if not hostile to the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, the uninsured, the addicted, the imprisoned, and so on” (468). Bracher does not consider the experiential or cognitive reasons for a student’s existing identifications or commitments and instead deems “truncated” any action or frame of thought that exists outside of his “comprehensive” causal schema. Bracher leaves no room for students to exercise agency from within a truncated causal schema; any actions related to such a schema are overdetermined by “American ideology.” Because the comprehensive schema is naturally in the hands of the teacher and is positioned in opposition to the “short-circuited” schemas of the students, his model reinforces an antagonistic and hierarchical division between teacher and student that leaves no room for recognizing productive student resistance. Similarly, Bracher’s cognitive model also reinforces a privileged hierarchy between sympathizer and sufferer by foreclosing any agency available to the “other” in his formulation of compassion. Bracher argues persuasively that our increased compassion will lead to increased action on behalf of social justice; however, he provides no language for recognizing actions available to those we feel compassion for. As Berlant suggests, such formulations of compassion construct an unequal and privileged relationship between the sufferer and the individual feeling compassion: “The sufferer is over there. You, the compassionate one, have a resource that would alleviate someone else’s suffering” (4).

Bracher takes us to task for not having affected enough change in our students already, and he attributes this failure to a lack of commitment on our part as well as insufficient tools for truly changing our students’ minds and, consequently, their behaviors. In order to fully take advantage of—or, Bracher would say, take responsibility for—our potential influence over our students’ perceptions of and responses to the world around
them, and to truly make a “difference in the injustice that permeates our world,” Bracher argues that we must accept that all teaching is designed to change students’ behaviors, and we must move beyond addressing issues of injustice in our teaching through logical reasoning and ideological critique and instead fully commit to reeducating our students’ emotions (463). The pedagogical model that Bracher proposes is designed to “defamiliariz[e]” students from their truncated schemas through a cognitive intervention, or “schema therapy” (489, 90). This therapy uses literature to replace students’ “incomplete, distorted schemas” with “more comprehensive, adequate schemas” by illustrating situations in which the harmful actions committed by characters, or the harmful state of being in which a character lives, are explained by temporally and spatially distant causes including environmental factors, genetic factors, traumatic experiences, and toxic social environments (490). As the students extend their reformed causal explanations beyond literary characters to real people, including criminals in the news as well as political figures toward whom they may feel animosity, they will experience “personally and socially beneficial changes in perception, judgment, emotion, and behavior” (490).

This “schema therapy” only works, of course, when we diagnose all of our students as needing treatment (and when they are all willing to undergo it!). Bracher’s pedagogical model makes an important point: we need to pay attention to our students’ cognitive lives as well as their social lives. Teaching to our fullest potential no doubt requires us to acknowledge the cognitive and social factors that affect our students’ learning. However, in doing so we must also provide a space for productive communication across difference as well as productive student resistance. In other words, we can’t just “repair” our students: we have to listen to them. Krista Ratcliffe theorizes “listening pedagogically” as a framework for negotiating the various types of resistance—resistance to dominant discourses of power as well as resistance to adopting new positions of thinking and learning—that are produced within classrooms attempting to address and communicate about and across cultural difference: “The goal is not to discover some transcendent truth about gender and whiteness but rather to lay all gender and race ‘cards’ on the table in hopes of negotiating the existing (mis)perceptions about them and their
intersections” (135). Like Bracher, Ratcliffe is concerned with correcting misperceptions about important social issues through her pedagogy; however, she is also concerned with examining the underlying fears and investments that motivate acts of resistance by both teachers and students. Similarly, Elizabeth Flynn distinguishes among “strategic,” “counter-strategic,” and “reactive” resistance in the feminist classroom in order to help us understand student resistance as a potential site for building communication and learning. Flynn sees in “strategic resistance” the most potential for liberatory action in opposition to oppression and injustice (22), but she comments that “in an atmosphere in which a variety of perspectives is encouraged, reactive resistance”—which she sees as the least critical form of resistance—“is inevitable and sometimes even desirable” (33). Both of these pedagogical models embrace a goal of introducing students to and even helping them adopt new ways of thinking about and approaching the world around them; however, they also understand student resistances more “comprehensively” as multiply situated, as legitimate and worthy of being taken seriously, and as changeable sites for potential identification. Although Bracher’s pedagogy is designed to increase compassion, it provides no framework for how we might teach our students to respect difference. Although it’s designed to change our students’ causal perceptions, it shows little interest in meeting students where they are, in addressing their own personal investments in their beliefs and the reasons and experiences that have impacted their perceptions, or in providing a space for students to interact productively with our pedagogical agendas in order to create their own place in our classroom and in the world outside of it.

In asking that we meet students “where they are,” I’m not proposing that they are perfect. Our students don’t all come to us with well thought-out positions on all the issues they will encounter in our classroom, and most of them truly do have a lot to learn. As they encounter new ways of thinking, many of our students react defensively at first, and they may not be able to let down these defenses at all during our class. Bracher’s careful attention to cognitive psychology reminds us that our students’ mental and emotional frameworks are still developing; it is especially clear to those of us who teach first-year composition and other first-year courses that the ability to integrate multiple perspectives into one’s own thinking
is something that develops not only with lessons in "critical thinking" but also with time and maturity. Our students have the potential to grow and change a lot in our classes, and because of this their behaviors may change as well. However, to take it upon ourselves to change our students' behaviors, to make this the center of our pedagogy, shrugs off our responsibility to build an environment of respect and communication in our classrooms, as well as overlooks the different experiences and perspectives our students bring to them.

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Works Cited


In his *JAC* article, "Teaching for Social Justice: Reeducating the Emotions Through Literary Studies," Mark Bracher questions the ability of educators to promote positive social justice. In particular, he analyzes what blocks the efforts of well-intentioned teachers to attain the ethical results that they often desire. One of the primary reasons that he gives for the failure to promote social change effectively is the fact that many contemporary academics have a fear of imposing a morality on their students: "Because morality is associated with asserting values, passing judgment, and controlling behavior, many critics have viewed it as oppressive, immoral, and to be avoided" (464). In contrast to these scholars who shy away from moral issues, Bracher asserts that it is impossible to avoid advocating a moral position; in fact, the very gesture of bracketing morality in education imposes the moral idea that one should avoid moralizing.

It is important to point out that Bracher is not promoting a turn to a more ethical or moral discourse that would be cut off from direct social action; rather, he is quick to argue that many moral arguments only serve to justify a delaying of social involvement, and most important of all, he emphasizes Geoffrey Harpham's idea that morality is often excluded from critical discourse because critics "desire to maintain an identity of moral purity and self-righteousness" (465). In the context of progressive education, Bracher adds that teachers avoid entering into ethical and moral discussions with their students because faculty members do not