The Brazilian educator Paolo Friere constantly asserted that education is a deeply political activity and never neutral. What knowledge is considered valued and worth learning, who can be there to teach, who can be there to learn, how we assess what has been learned, etc. Are all questions with political answers.

If anyone doubts the political nature of education, you only have to look at what took place this past 10 days here at the UW campus.

I want to say a little about me so you all know a little about where I’m coming from. I then want to share my view of all that happened in the last couple of weeks and why I arrived at the decisions I did. I end with some questions I believe we need to consider and my hope for the future.

I came to the UW 10 years ago. In that time, one of the many tasks I’ve taken on is bringing to the campus a variety of experts with national and international reputation in an effort to sustain and advance the conversation about cultural and linguistic diversity and the pursuit of social justice from a transformative knowledge perspective. Among others, I took a leadership role in inviting multicultural educators such as Christine Sleeter and Geneva Gay. I took a leadership role in inviting indigenous language scholars such as Richard Little Bear and English language learner expert Aida Walqui. I took the lead in bringing critical educators including Antonia Darder and Jeff Duncan-Andrade.

And these weren’t always without controversy. I was co-chair of the Symposium for Social Justice when it was renamed the Shepard Symposium for Social Justice. We were criticized for that. One of the most controversial speakers the Symposium brought in was Ruben Hurricane Carter and we were constantly harassed by a couple of students regarding Carter’s presence here.

In 2008, I was appointed as director of the UW Social Justice Research Center, a university-wide organization committed to scholarship with a social justice focus. Along with an advisory group with representation from nearly all of the colleges, one of the first things we did was to define what we meant by social justice, realizing the contested nature of this term, and wanting to be clear about what we were about. In part, we believe that social justice requires:

a) attention to understanding the social forces and institutions that support inequity in social systems as well as the interpersonal behaviors, individual attitudes, or beliefs that reflect and also help to perpetuate unequal social relationships; b) acknowledgement of the inter-relatedness of phenomena and thereby employ multiple lenses including historical, political, cultural, economic, legal, etc.; and c) value and affirmation of multiple perspectives and points of view including the use of counter-narratives. Social justice research attends to problems of oppression and generates strategies for working toward their resolution.

Two of our primary goals to foster social justice research were as follows:
The Intellectual exchange rooted in critical analysis
and
Constructive dialogue undertaken in a climate of respect

We have done a variety of things including supporting 15 projects by UW faculty and/or students that have a social justice focus from exploring the sanitation system in Liberia and the economic downturn’s impact on women’s cooperatives in Oaxaca to looking at the experiences of African American and Native Americans on the rodeo circuit and possibilities of community-school collaborations on Native American reservations. We have co-sponsored a variety of speakers with departments from across the university: from English to Law to Agriculture on topics from the ethics of food distribution to, just last week, the role of Latinos in integrating baseball. In addition, we have brought speakers to campus who have an academic interest in some aspect of social justice: from education, to immigration, to indigenous epistemologies.

We look for speakers who write about social justice from some academic discipline, who are active and highly respected in their disciplinary field, and who have often completed a new academic work usually a book of note. Consistent with our definition of social justice, we sought speakers who brought alternative points of view and who bring a counter discourse when compared to traditional knowledge.

Last fall, we invited Dr. Bill Ayers to campus. I urge you to read Allen Trent’s letter to the editor in last week’s Boomerang about the very reasons why we were inviting Dr. Ayers. In describing a speech he had heard Ayers present, Allen wrote:

He talked a great deal about his time as a kindergarten teacher, about caring approaches to teaching and learning and about ways we can better serve children in U.S. schools, especially the many poor and minority children that are currently being failed by our schools and communities. These are not ideas to be feared and silenced, but instead are ideas upon which we should reflect deeply and act swiftly if we truly believe in our country's foundational ideals — liberty, equality, freedom, and justice.

Since confirming his visit, we began making announcements in public forums within the UW community when we could. We did not hear any discontent. About the last month, we began more actively advertising his visit on the UW campus. Again, we did not hear any discontent.

Given his primary focus on education we also created a forum where high school principals from around the state would have a chance to discuss educational reform issues with him.

It was as simple and, as I have come to learn, as complicated as that.

On Friday, March 26th, my own email and phone but also the Center’s began being overwhelmed with emails and phone messages almost exclusively responding negatively
to Dr. Ayers visit. While I was expecting some people would object to his visit, we were absolutely surprised by the number of people expressing objection and the intensity of their objection. While a small handful were asking questions and suggesting that the forum be “balanced,” the majority were hostile and mean spirited. While almost all used the word terrorist, they included references to Hitler, AlQuida, Osama bin Laden, Charles Manson. They attacked me personally but also the Dean of the College of Education, Provost Allen, President Buchanan, and the Board of Trustees.

They were difficult to read and listen to.

I soon realized that this talk was no longer about social inequalities in schooling and how a social justice framework might begin to address those inequalities, the primary purpose of the invitation. I began to fear that an intellectual exchange rooted in a critical analysis and a constructive dialogue undertaken in a climate of respect would not be possible. Our major purpose, I felt, was going to be lost.

These messages continued on throughout the weekend and on Monday they started up again in full force.

Late Monday afternoon, I spoke with the UW police chief who shared with me that they had ordered bomb sniffing dogs to be in the auditorium both before and during the presentation. And since there were “veiled” threats of violence that Homeland Security had been contacted.

At this point, I knew things had gotten out of hand. The COE auditorium stands right next to the Deans office. It also houses a K-9 school where students would be rehearsing for a performance. I felt that putting them in harms way was too much to ask.

I made the decision to cancel this event, one of the most difficult decisions I have ever had to make as an educational professional and a decision that I’m sure I will question the rest of my professional career.

Quite honestly, several of my own significant personal challenges, making this year already one of the most difficult ever even before what has occurred, was also a factor in how I responded. Rarely do I ever feel this much despair and this little hope.

My mentors taught me that it’s not only about doing the right thing, but also about doing things in a good way.

I realized this was not the right time, the right place, and the right circumstances to move forward with Dr. Ayers talk. We needed a broader conversation first about what it means to be a university in a state like Wyoming, how we respond to hate and threats of violence, what freedom of speech on a college campus really means (even in its most challenging, complex form), and whether there are any limits to the depth and/or breadth of freedom of speech on a university campus.
We need to be clear about what we are and what we are not about.

Questions abound. Some of those that I think we need to grapple with most are:

- How is the current mood of the country, especially that revealed around the discourse and hostility around the health care debate, a reflection of what occurred when some folks heard about Dr. Ayres invitation to the UW campus and how does what occurred here impact the mood of the country?

- If the goal is a university that aspires to be world class, in addition to serving the state, What ought citizens of the state of Wyoming expect from UW? How do we communicate that and work toward some degree of consent?

- How will the university proactively respond to influential alumni, citizens, donors, and students who might disagree with social justice aims? How will the university respond politically to veiled threats of violence, when the university engages in an activity it believes represents an important part of its mission?

Believe me, beyond these many questions, there are many more I ask myself as well about my role, my actions, and the principles which guide my work: respectfulness, attention to institutional analysis, agency and the strength of alliances, and trudging toward freedom.

Throughout it all, I want you to know that I’ve appreciated the support I’ve received as well. Several faculty served as a sounding board for me during this all. The faculty in the College of Education and the small but important network of faculty of color have been a source of strength, along with friends both on and off the campus.

Those in this city and around the state who hold a progressive perspective continue to remind us that the perspectives of the citizens of Wyoming are not monolithic and are an equally important part of the discourse in this state.

In closing, I want to thank the organizers of this panel. I hope this is the first of many conversations we will have both here at UW and with the citizens of the state of Wyoming wherein we ask ourselves the really difficult questions about the place of the university in the state and in the nation, its broadest purposes, and all the means available to us to accomplish those aims.

That is, we need an intellectual exchange rooted in a critical analysis and a constructive dialogue undertaken in a climate of respect.

I really hope and believe and trust that there are too many wonderful women and men, faculty, students, staff and citizens of the state, brothers and sisters, all of us, who will help us be stronger as a result of what has happened. Kevin Kumashiro writes that “social justice happens not when the educational context is ideal, however that is defined
or imagined, but rather through working against the problems and paradoxes that mark any context.” And therein, lies my hope.