FORUM

Invitational Interaction: A Process for Reconciling the Teacher/Student Contradiction

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A week into the Institutional Values section of one of the first-year composition courses that I was teaching, a student brought in a copy of our university's "Code of Student Conduct" as an illustration. She read the following selection from that text:

> The Code of Student Conduct at Miami University is intended to foster and protect the central purpose of the University: the free and open exchange of ideas…. The Code embraces several important values: the rights of free speech and peaceable assembly; the freedom of inquiry and the right to make constructive criticism…. The Code … primarily prohibits misconduct on University premises … but may address off campus conduct when the behavior or the presence of the individual, in the University's sole judgment, impairs, obstructs, or interferes with the mission, processes, or functions of Miami University. (3)

"Hmmm. An excellent example of Institutional Values," I think to myself.

"So how does this text relate to what we've be talking about thus far?" I ask. Silence. More silence. "OK. Well, how does this make you respond? Does the contradiction in these statements bother you at all? What does it mean for the University to write that they embrace free speech and inquiry and then state that the University possesses the 'sole judgment' to decide which acts threaten such rights?" Silence. More silence. I'm torn; I can hear Paulo Freire whispering to me: "Don't answer your own questions. If you do, you are merely disseminating knowledge to 'empty vessels' and giving students some supposedly ideal answer. Don't make me call you an oppressive teacher, Jennifer" (Freire 147). "But the silence, Paulo, the silence!"

"OK. Take a few minutes to write down your thoughts to these questions," I say, deciding to use this opportunity to discuss not only institutional discourse but also invention strategies for composing. Blank faces stare back. I repeat the questions and we begin to write. Ten minutes later I ask expectantly, "So, what were some of your responses?" Silence. More silence. Before me, I see an image of myself: arms stretched in supplication; eyes raised to the heavens; my voice screaming, "Paulooooooo!"

Silence: it is certainly a complexity. As reflection, it can be an incredible heuristic in the liberatory composition classroom, a contact zone of one's own consciousness in which students and teachers alike confront the inequity of their positions. Yet, like all complexities, it has the potential to be a crippling barrier as well. Students, long since acclimated to their own dehumanization at the hands of both the educational system and teachers, often utilize silence as an oppositional behavior, a non-productive resistance in which the oppressed merely reproduce the traditional asymmetrical paradigms of power, as Henry Giroux notes in *Theory and Resistance in Education* (Giroux 103). Such reproduction halts the faintest possibility of a praxis of freedom within the classroom because such a critical pedagogy is dependent upon the mutual interaction between instructor and student. As the unveiling of the world must occur through dialogue, there must be the possibility of fruitful interaction. Consequently, oppositional silence can be a death sentence to the liberatory classroom, for, if there is no interaction, there can be no dialectic; if no dialectic, no resistance; and if no resistance, no liberation.

Yet, how can we, as critical pedagogues, expect students to relinquish what has been in the banking system of education, one of the few trump cards that they have held. Suddenly, we want to change the rules, most of which students at institutions of higher learning have by this time mastered. Inculcated into the hegemonic educational pedagogy which has dictated a particular structure, a particular order, and a particular moral authority, students now find themselves chastised for possessing what *Public Agenda* summarized in a poll of American high school students as "a hunger for structure [and] discipline … a yearning for order [and] moral authority" (*Public Agenda* 36). Essentially, students find their ways of being not only insufficient but possibly demonized. So, how can this transition from being told x to exploring x in a dialectical exchange be realized without the prescription and alienation that have caused students to cling to such oppositional acts of resistance as nonproductive silence?

Paulo Freire states in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that the first step in this transition is resolution. "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-stu-

dent contradiction, by reconciling the poles of contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire 53). Too often, familiarity or expertise in a particular subject is used as a crutch upon which teacher and student rationalize the disproportionate means of exchange in the traditional classroom. One might think that the most facilitative way to accomplish the reconciliation of these poles is to downplay the power that an instructor inherits from her or his position in the classroom. However, such a strategy is contrary to the aims of liberatory pedagogy for two reasons: first, this downplaying often results in a teacher's watering down and, in some instances, completely negating her own didactic responsibility; and second, the aim of liberation is not the disempowerment of the teacher, but rather the empowerment of both instructor and student alike as Lisa Delpit notes in *Other People's Children* (Delpit 36). Another problematic strategy which seeks Freire's solution is to demand that students take risks and be resistant, as Lad Tobin confesses to having demanded in *Writing Relationships*, but to do so merely exchanges one form of oppression for another (Tobin 14). So what then is the solution to this teacher-student contradiction? I certainly do not possess the solution; yet, I do believe that there is a process by which this reconciliation can begin: invitational interaction.

In order to move beyond the metaphors of the student as an empty vessel and of the teacher as the disseminator of knowledge, the liberatory pedagogue must invite students to interact in an environment that welcomes this contradiction and ultimate reconciliation. To do so the instructor must take the following steps in order to create that environment –– a creation, which Donald Murray states in *Learning by Teaching*, is the responsibility of the instructor (Murray 142-143). First, with explicitness, instructors much locate and name their pedagogy for both themselves and their students. Second, instructors must display their humility and, consequently, their own vulnerability (Freire 71). Through such praxis, instructors will mark those classrooms as spaces that differ from traditional oppressive educational experiences, experiences that most students have become quite accustomed to, if not dependent upon. By doing so, instructors offer an invitation which will not necessarily lessen but will at least acknowledge the pain and frustration that is associated with such a transition from the oppressive educational sphere to the potentially liberating one.

As Peter McLaren states in the foreword to *Paulo Freire on Higher Education*, "Emancipatory praxis has been largely orphaned in our institutions of education, as educators are either unable or refuse to name the political location of their own pedagogical praxis" (McLaren xvii). How are students to know that I, for example, do not wish to reproduce the traditional constrictive role of "The Teacher," a role

that I feel limits both myself and students through a seemingly latent process of oppression. To begin, I must make such a declaration, pointing to the pedagogical foundation by which I wish to conduct myself and the political implications of such a pedagogy. Not to do so forces students into a mind-reading role where the "right" answer to every question and/or discussion exists; this answer is, of course, "The Teacher's Answer." Such mind-reading merely reinforces the traditional paradigms of power and halts dialogue and reflection, elements that are critical to the roles of readers and writers. As both dialogue and reflection cannot exist in an environment where everything is focused on the teacher, we, as instructors, must create an environment based on invitation and interaction. Thus, having modeled our own pedagogy, the instructor must invite the students to locate their own positions as students, the meaning of these locations, and the political implications associated with those varying positions. However, such declarations must not be mistaken for a panacea to the interactional hindrances that arise from the teacher/student poles of contradiction; yet, the admission of the existence of such poles can be a jumping-off point where the divide between instructor and students begins to be blurred and the entry-point for critical thinking begins to form.

By drawing connections whenever possible between one's everyday teaching and the philosophy of one's own pedagogy, an instructor can introduce reflection and reassure oneself as well as the students, many of whom will be grappling with the idea of what a teacher should be and, consequently, their own roles as students. However, as I stated before, these declarations are not a cure-all to oppositional acts of resistance.

To offer an example, for the institutional values unit-paper, I had assigned what I thought to be a rather clear, yet open-ended paper. I wrote down the *Public Agenda* quotation that I mentioned earlier and stated, "Explore this quotation within the context of institutional discourse and examine the values that are presented in these texts. Remember to look at the how, who, why, and what (invention strategy prompts that we had been using throughout the unit)." The students were about a day-and-a-half into class-time brainstorming and writing with their paper partners, when Matt and Jane called me over to their seats. From the questions that they were asking, it was obvious that they weren't exactly sure of what to do with this quotation. This certainly concerned me since we had spent what I thought to be quite a bit of time discussing possible approaches to the paper. As a result I had a hard time understanding exactly what it was that they were asking me. After working with them for about twenty minutes, they said that they had a better understanding of the goals of this paper; yet, I doubted the accuracy of this

statement and sensed that my time with them had just furthered their frustrations, as well as my own. As Matt was the last one walking out of class that day, I took the opportunity to ask him if our conversation had really helped him at all. He responded, "Not really. The problem is that there are an infinite number of questions and answers to how, who, why, and what." "But that's one of the points," I said. "Why should this quote have only one answer that would result from on right question?" "But you didn't tell us that that was OK," he stated. "I thought that you had particular questions in mind."

My heart sank. Hadn't I stated my pedagogical location in the beginning of the semester and hadn't I, during discussions in class, always tried to stress that the viewpoints that I took were not truths but rather my own grapplings with the subject matter at hand and that these grapplings were no more or less valid than their own? But before me now stood a student –– just one of many I would find out during the next class period when Matt recounted our discussion for the rest of the students –– who still wanted to locate this first-year composition course within the traditional hierarchical power paradigms –– and me along with it! "But I told all of you that I didn't want to be that kind of teacher," I thought to myself, as I teetered on the divide between liberatory pedagogy and "liberation propaganda" (Freire 49).

Later I came to this realization: how could I really blame Matt for his response? How many teachers had said to him before that they valued his input and insight and then turned around and shot these down with the "right" answer? How many had done the same to me in my role as a student? Instructors must continually in a dynamic process reflect upon and support their pedagogical declarations with day-to-day praxis in order to create an environment that is marked by its quest for an absence of traditional power relations and its invitation to student authority. And more importantly, I had to recognize that perhaps in this class I hadn't done as good a job with this dynamic process as I thought that I had.

At the same time, we must use the discrepancies that arise from our educational theories and praxis to highlight our own contradictions. This brings me to the second point, which every liberatory pedagogue must possess: humility. Without it, students often have no other option except oppositional silence, for example. Too often, teachers, having grown accustomed to the "right" answers pouring forth from their god-like lips or novice instructors themselves accustomed to such teachers, both brush contradictions that slip from those very lips under the rug. The thinking goes, if Truth or some semblance of truths is what I speak and impart, any contradiction that arises between one Truth and another makes one of those truths wrong and consequently, me wrong along with it. In the traditional class-

room, teachers, as well as students, view contradictions as "failings" and as a threat to or even a usurpation by the student of the teacher's intrinsic power and her/his "right" to hold authority in the classroom.

Yet, if we evolve away from such reductive reasoning and actually embrace these seemingly "wrong" answers as the rightful complexities that they are, we, both the teacher-student and the student-teacher –– to use Freire's terminology –– can begin to reflect upon and ultimately transform the ideologies that created this reductive reasoning in the first place.

To do so, instructors must be willing to humble themselves and in doing so admit to our own vulnerability. It is too easy within a critical pedagogy-inluenced syllabus, for example, to name the university as a space of privilege, a space in which many students are more fully indoctrinated into the culture of oppression, and to point out, at the same time, that students are themselves becoming more oppressed within and by the discourse community of the educational institution. Do not we, who struggle to support critical thinking, do not we who uphold the aims of liberatory pedagogy, and do not we, as instructors, have a responsibility to offer ourselves as illustrations of a similar contradiction –– our livelihood depends upon the existence of the university system; and yet, as liberatory pedagogues, we are attempting to subvert the very ideologies behind that system. We must learn to share the inconsistencies, indeed at times, the apparent "failings" of our praxis to support educational theories, and most importantly, the act of learning. By doing so, we can create a space where the exploration of contradictions –– once again too often labeled "failings" –– can be encouraged rather than hidden. Imagine the possibilities that such an experience would create for our students as readers and writers alone. This might indeed foster in them the ability to deconstruct and untangle not only the obvious concepts in a particular text but also, and perhaps more importantly, to tease out the subtle contradictions so often imbued in the making of meaning. Consequently, students and teachers alike can begin to reveal the very structure of oppression which liberatory pedagogy calls to be transformed. Our own humility and admission to vulnerability can be, must be, an invitation to students to recognize and explore moving beyond the dehumanized position of the empty vessel. I offer the following contradictions that arose in my own language –– a language that struggles to be conscious of itself –– and how this contradiction during class allowed me to humble myself.

One day, I asked the students to write down as many Caucasian females, as well as minority men and women, that they had learned about over the course of their education. One student asked if we were limited to Americans or if they could name anyone in the world. I figured why not give ourselves a fighting chance, so

I said, "Anyone in the world." While we were writing, Eric, who had been working with a couple of other students, called me over to him. He lowered his voice and whispered, obviously so that the whole class could not hear, "Now, if we are looking at the whole world wouldn't white people be the minority?" I thought for a minute and said, "You're right; I didn't even make that connection." Downplaying his own insight into the complexity of language, Eric responded, "Oh well, I just sort of thought of that." "Would you share this with the class, please?" I asked. "Are you sure?" he questioned. Although I was not, I decided to practice my own theoretical pedagogy. "Sure, you made a really important observation," I responded. While Eric recounted our discussion to the rest of the class and while I attempted to silence that voice in my own head, which was scoldingly saying, "you really should have known that," I was able to cite an instance where my theory-based pedagogy was supported by praxis. In class, we used this event to illustrate two things: 1) the power of language, and 2) the continual process of learning.

I do not want to make it seem that such an incident in any way erased the border between instructor and student; it did not. Yet, I do think that a consciousness of the pedagogical foundation from which I was working pushed me to recognize this contradiction and in doing so allowed the students to see my own struggle with what we were discussing in class, as well as, my willingness –– although it was not easily proffered –– to admit to my own vulnerability. We must be willing to perform such acts of humility, if we are to claim for ourselves in the classroom the positions of "men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*" (Freire 65).

> The problem-posing educator constantly re-forms [her/his] reflections in the reflection of the students. The students –– no longer docile listeners –– are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers [her and his] earlier considerations as the students express their own. (Freire 62)

How can we, as instructors, do this without admitting to our own "process of *becoming*," a process that involves the realization and verbalization of contradictions, which is the first step towards the reconciliation of the poles of contradiction. I have found that my everyday teaching has provided a plethora of contradictions between my pedagogical theory and praxis, contradictions, many of which I was not conscious of in the moment and many of which I am sure I am still not conscious. If we, as teachers, find that we must continually guard against contradictions, we will find our students doing the same and all will find themselves

trapped in the static sphere of oppositional silence and other such nonproductive acts of resistance.

Naming our pedagogical locations and displaying our own humility will not erase in one fell swoop the divide that separates instructors and students; yet, these processes that I have elaborated upon do offer an invitation to students to explore their own locations as students, as well as their willingness or lack of willingness to take risks in the classroom –– risks, often defined as mere participation, which demand a certain humility and an openness to seeming vulnerable.

Let's face it: the moment a person walks into the classroom, he or she is named either student or teacher. With such naming, difference is automatically evoked. The elemental nature of this does make me question whether we could ever completely escape the limitations of this delineation in a setting such as the university. Yet, to support a liberatory pedagogy, we, as instructors, must be willing to model and to offer ourselves as examples, not of whom we want our students to be or where we want them to evolve to, but rather as people who are indeed reflecting critically upon the world in which they exist and, also, as people who invite and are open to others investigating for themselves such matters, no matter what the contradictions that arise from our differing locations. It is only then that we can hope the contradiction between the poles of instructor and students can be reconciled.

So, you might be asking, "towards the end of the semester, did oppositional silence disappear from your classes?" No, it did not; but then again, I still practice it myself in the occasional seminar. In terms of first-year composition, however, I at least found myself wondering during those times when no answer was offered to a discussion question whether the students were being oppositionally resistant or if they were critically reflecting. As the answer to this question was not, is not, and will not be easily evident, I must content myself with the fact that the possibility of critical reflection is, ultimately, the possibility of liberation. ❋

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