



Pedagogy of the Distressed

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Jane Tompkins

Pedagogy of the Distressed

Fear is what prevents the flowering of the mind.

—J. Krishnamurti,
On Education

I

As professors of English we are always one way or another talking about what we think is wrong with the world and to a lesser extent about what we'd like to see changed. Whether we seek gender equality, or economic justice, or simply believe in the power and beauty of great literature, we preach some gospel or other. We do this indirectly, but always. What I have to say is very simple and comes directly off this point: our practice in the classroom doesn't often come very close to instantiating the values we preach.

I was led to think about the distance between what we do as teachers and what we say we believe in by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, whose great theme is that you cannot have a revolution unless education becomes a practice of freedom. That is, to the extent that the teaching situation reflects the power relations currently in force, which are assumed to be oppressive and authoritarian, to that extent will the students themselves, when they come to power, reproduce that situation in another form. He argues that if political revolution is to succeed, pedagogy must first enact that very unalienated condition which the revolution presumably exists to usher in. Now the situation that currently pertains in the classroom, according to Freire, can best be understood through the analogy of banking. "In the banking concept of education," he writes, "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. . . . Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (58).

I don't think that this is the model we have to contend with in the United States today, at least not in higher education, at least not for the most part. We have class discussion, we have oral reports, we have student participation of

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various kinds—students often choose their own paper topics, suggest additional readings, propose issues for discussion. As far as most of us are concerned, the banking model is obsolete. But what we do have is something no less coercive, no less destructive of creativity and self-motivated learning, and that is something I'll call the performance model.

I became aware of this phenomenon some four or five years ago when I was teaching a combined graduate-undergraduate course at Columbia University. Why the realization came to me then I cannot explain. I remember walking down the empty hall to class (always a little bit late) and thinking to myself, "I have to remember to find out what they want, what they need, and not worry about whether what I've prepared is good enough or ever gets said at all." Whereas, for my entire teaching life, I had always thought that what I was doing was helping my students to understand the material we were studying—Melville or deconstruction or whatever—I had finally realized that what I was actually concerned with and focused on most of the time were three things: a) to show the students how smart I was, b) to show them how knowledgeable I was, and c) to show them how well-prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me. I think that this essentially, and more than anything else, is what we teach our students: how to perform within an institutional academic setting in such a way that they will be thought highly of by their colleagues and instructors.

What is behind this model? How did it come to be that our main goal as academicians turned out to be performance? I think the answer to the question is fairly complicated, but here is one way to go. Each person comes into a professional situation dragging along behind her a long bag full of desires, fears, expectations, needs, resentments—the list goes on. But the main component is fear. Fear is the driving force behind the performance model. Fear of being shown up for what you are: a fraud, stupid, ignorant, a clod, a dolt, a sap, a weakling, someone who can't cut the mustard. In graduate school, especially, fear is prevalent. Thinking about these things, I became aware recently that my own fear of being shown up for what I really am must transmit itself to my students, and insofar as I was afraid to be exposed, they too would be afraid.

Such fear is no doubt fostered by the way our institution is organized, but it is rooted in childhood. Many, perhaps most people, who go into academic life are people who as children were good performers at home and in school. That meant that as children they/we successfully imitated the behavior of adults before we were in fact ready to do so. Having covered over our true childish selves, we have ever since been afraid of being revealed as the unruly beings we actually are. Fear of exposure, of being found out, does not have its basis in any real inadequacies either of knowledge or intelligence on our part, but rather in the performance model itself which, in separating our behavior from what we really felt, created a kind of false self. (This notion of the false self comes from Alice Miller's *The Drama of the Gifted Child*). We became so good at imitating the behavior of our elders, such expert practitioners at imitating whatever style, stance, or attitude seemed most likely to succeed in the adult world from which

we so desperately sought approval that we came to be split into two parts: the real backstage self who didn't know anything and the performing self who got others to believe in its expertise and accomplishments. This pattern of seeking approval has extended itself into our practice as teachers. Still seeking approval from our peers and from our students, we exemplify a model of performance which our students succeed in emulating, thus passing the model down to future generations. Ironically, as teachers we are still performing for the teachers who taught us.

There is one other kind of fear that I want to mention here, institutional in its origin, and that is the fear of pedagogy itself as a focus of our attention. We have been indoctrinated from the very start, at least I was, to look down on pedagogy as a subject matter and to deride colleges of education. I was taught to see them as a sort of natural repository for the unsmart, the people who scored in the 50th percentile on their tests and couldn't make it into the higher realms to which I had so fortunately been admitted.

I remember quite vividly my introduction to this point of view. It was in an anteroom at Swarthmore College while waiting to be interviewed by a committee representing the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. While I sat there in a state of abject terror, I overheard a conversation between two young men also hoping to convince the committee's greybeards to find them worthy of a fellowship. One of them said to the other—I no longer remember his exact words—that thinking about teaching was the lowest of the low and that anyone who occupied himself with it was hopelessly beyond the pale and just didn't belong in higher education. I'll never forget my surprise and dismay at hearing this opinion which had never occurred to me before, for I had previously thought (coming from a family of teachers) that teaching was an important part of what any college professor would do. As things turned out, I subsequently embraced the view I overheard and held it as my own for some thirty years; or rather, this view embraced me, for my antipedagogical indoctrination went on pretty steadily throughout graduate school.

Now obviously, despite all this, I must have given some thought over the years to what went on in my classroom. One cannot be a total somnambulist and still survive, though I think a lot of people, myself included, have come pretty close. But I paid attention only when forced to because things weren't going well, and even then I felt I was doing something vaguely illegitimate. I used to wonder by what mysterious process others managed their classes, since no one I knew had been trained to do it and no one ever talked, really talked, about what they did. Oh, there were plenty of success stories and the predictable remarks about a discussion that had been like pulling teeth but never anything about how it really felt to be up there day after day.

In this respect teaching was exactly like sex for me—something you weren't supposed to talk about or focus on in any way but that you were supposed to be able to do properly when the time came. And the analogy doesn't end there. Teaching, like sex, is something you do alone, although you're always with another person/other people when you do it; it's hard to talk about to the other while you're doing it, especially if you've been taught not to think about it from

an early age. And people rarely talk about what the experience is really like for them, partly because, in whatever subculture it is I belong to, there's no vocabulary for articulating the experience and no institutionalized format for doing so.

But there is one thing people do sometimes talk about in relation to teaching, and they do this now more frequently than in the past. They talk about using teaching as a vehicle for social change. We tell ourselves that we need to teach our students to think critically so that they can detect the manipulations of advertising, analyze the fallacious rhetoric of politicians, expose the ideology of popular TV shows, resist the stereotypes of class, race, and gender; or, depending on where you're coming from, hold the line against secular humanism and stop canon-busting before it goes too far.

But I have come to think more and more that what really matters as far as our own beliefs and projects for change are concerned is not so much what we talk about in class as what we do. I have come to think that teaching and learning are not a preparation for anything but are the thing itself. There is a catch-22 in the assumption that what you say in class or what you write for publication is the real vehicle for change. For if you speak and write only so that other people will hear and read and repeat your ideas to other people who will repeat them, maybe, to other people, but not so that they will do something, then what good are your words?

I've come to realize that the classroom is a microcosm of the world; it is the chance we have to practice whatever ideals we may cherish. The kind of classroom situation one creates is the acid test of what it is one really stands for. And I wonder, in the case of college professors, if performing their competence in front of other people is all that that amounts to in the end.

II

I've now made an awkward lunge in the direction of creating a different world in the classes I teach. It wasn't virtue or principle that led me to this but brute necessity caused by lack of planning. A year ago last fall, because I knew I wouldn't have time to prepare my classes in the usual way, I borrowed a new teaching method from a colleague and discovered, almost by accident, a way to make teaching more enjoyable and less anxiety-producing.

More enjoyment and less anxiety do not sound like very high-minded goals. In fact, they are self-centered. My upbringing taught me never to declare that anything I did was self-centered, especially not if it had to do with an activity like teaching, which is supposed to be altruistic. But I had discovered that under the guise of serving students, I was being self-centered anyway, always worrying about what people thought of me. So I tried something else for a change.

What the method boils down to is this: the students are responsible for presenting the material to the class for most of the semester. I make up the syllabus in advance, explain it in detail at the beginning of the course, and try to give most of my major ideas away. (This is hard; holding on to one's ideas in case one should need them to fill some gap later on is bred in the bone after twenty-odd years in the classroom). The students sign up for two topics that interest

them, and they work with whoever else has signed up for their topic; anywhere from two to four people will be in charge on any given day. On the first round of reports the groups meet with me outside of class to discuss their ideas and strategies of presentation. I give plenty of feedback in written form, but no grades.

I find that my classes are better. The students have more to say in every class, more students take part in the discussions, students talk more to each other and less to me, and the intensity and quality of their engagement with the course materials is higher than usual. Because I don't have the burden of responsibility for how things are going to go every time, I can contribute when I feel I really have something to say. I concentrate better on what is being said, on who is talking, and on how the class is going—how things feel in the class.

The upshot is I do less work and enjoy class more. But I feel guilty about this. Partly because somewhere along the way I got the idea that only back-breaking work should produce good results. I struggle not to feel guilty at teaching in a way that is pleasurable to me and free from fear because part of what I now try to do as a teacher conveys a sense of the way I think life ought to be. This means, among other things, offering a course that is not a rat race, either for me or for the students. I no longer believe that piling on the work is a good in itself or that it proves seriousness and dedication. The point is not to make people suffer. The trial-by-fire model that graduate school sets is a bad one for the classroom. Education is not a preparation for war; the university is not a boot camp.

Still, there is the question of whether, in shifting the burden of performance onto the students, I'm not making them do work I'm too lazy to do myself, sending them off on a journey with inadequate supplies, telling them to go fishing without a rod or bait, demanding that they play the Kreutzer Sonata before they can do a scale. It's true that in some cases the students don't deal with the material as well as I could, but that is exactly why they need to do it. It's not important for me to polish my skills, but they do need to develop theirs and to find a voice.

When the same person is doing the presenting all the time, inevitably one line of approach to the materials is going to dominate. But when it's not the teacher who is always calling the shots, the interests of the individual students have a chance to emerge. You find out what they want to focus on, think is important, believe in. Several points of view get to be enunciated from the position of designated speaker: students get practice in presenting material in a way that is interesting and intelligible to other people; the variety keeps the class entertained and passes responsibility around so that even the quietest students have to contribute and end up feeling better about themselves.

Almost every class I've conducted in this way has had its own intellectual center of gravity. A cluster of issues, or sometimes a single problem, keeps on coming up; the students develop a vocabulary and a common set of references for discussing it. This gives the class a sense of identity, a coherence as much social as intellectual.

But I want not so much to make a pitch for this method, which, after all, is not that new, as to relay what I have learned from these experiences.

Last spring I taught a course on a subject I had been wanting to explore but knew little about: the subject was emotion. The course was offered under the rubric Feminist Theory in the Humanities, one of three core courses in a women's studies graduate certificate program newly launched at my university. I'd gotten the idea for this course from a brilliant lecture Alison Jaggar had given entitled "Love and Knowledge." Jaggar argued that since reason, in Western epistemology, had traditionally been stipulated as the faculty by which we know what we know, and since women, in Western culture, are required to be the bearers of emotion, women were automatically delegitimized as sources of knowledge, their epistemic authority cut off from the start.

Using this idea as my inspiration, I decided we would look at the way emotion had been dealt with in the West—in philosophy, psychology, anthropology, literature and literary criticism, and religious studies (this was an interdisciplinary course both in subject matter and in enrollment). We ended by looking at examples of feminist writing that integrated emotion and ideation both in substance and in form.

This was the most amazing course I've ever taught, or rather the most amazing course I've never taught, because each class was taught by the students. Since I had no expertise in any of the areas we were dealing with except the literary, there was no way I could be responsible for presenting the material every time. So, having put together a syllabus by hook or by crook, I distributed responsibility for class presentations in the way I've just outlined. I encouraged the students to be creative in their modes of presentation, and, since this was a course in emotion, encouraged people to be free in expressing their feelings and to talk about their own experiences whenever they seemed relevant. One of the points of the course was, in practice, to break down the barrier between public discourse and private feeling, between knowledge and experience.

You see, I wanted to be iconoclastic. I wanted to change the way it was legitimate to behave inside academic institutions. I wanted to make it OK to get shrill now and then, to wave your hands around, to cry in class, to do things in relation to the subject at hand other than just talking in an expository or adversarial way about it. I wanted never to lose sight of the fleshly, desiring selves who were engaged in discussing hegemony or ideology or whatever it happened to be; I wanted to get the ideas that were "out there," the knowledge that was piled up impersonally on shelves, into relation with the people who were producing and consuming it. I wanted to get "out there" and "in here" together. To forge a connection between whatever we were talking about in class and what went on in the lives of the individual members. This was a graduate course, and the main point, for me, was for the students, as a result of the course, to feel some deeper connection between what they were working on professionally and who they were, the real concerns of their lives.

This may sound utopian. Or it may sound child-like. But I did and do believe that unless there is some such connection, the work is an empty labor which will end by killing the organism that engages in it.

The course was in some respects a nightmare. There were days when people went at each other so destructively that students cried after class or got migraine

headaches (I started getting migraines after every class before long). There were huge misunderstandings, factions, discussions at cross purposes, floundering, a sense of incoherence, everything that one might have feared. There were days when I decided I had literally opened Pandora's box and that we would all have been better off conducting business as usual. One day I myself was on the verge of tears as I spoke.

But this was also the most exciting class I've ever been in. I never knew what was going to happen. Apart from a series of stunning self-revelations, wonderful readings added to the reading list by the students, and reports whose trajectory came as a total surprise, we were led, as a class, by various reporting groups into role-playing, picture drawing, and even on one occasion into participating in a religious ceremony.

I learned from this class that every student in every class one "teaches" is a live volcano, or, as James Taylor puts it in his song, "a churnin' urn o' burnin' funk." There is no one thing that follows from this discovery, but for me it has meant that I can never teach in the old way again. By which I mean that I can never fool myself into believing that what I have to say is ultimately more important to the students than what they think and feel. I know now that each student is a walking field of energy teeming with agendas. Knowing this I can conduct my classes so as to tap into that energy field and elicit some of the agendas.

Which brings me, in conclusion, to my current rules of thumb reminders of what I've learned that keep me pointed in the right direction.

- Trust the students. Years of habit get in the way, years of taking all the responsibility for the class on yourself. You have to believe that the students will come through and not be constantly stepping into the breach. The point is for the students to become engaged, take responsibility, feel their own power and ability, not for you, one more time, to prove you've got the right stuff.
- Talk to the class about the class. For mnemonic purposes, we might call this the "good sex directive." Do this at the beginning of the course to get yourself and the students used to it. Make it no big deal, just a normal part of day-to-day business, and keep it up, so that anything that's making you or other people unhappy can be addressed before it gets too big or too late to deal with.
- Less is more. It's better to underassign than to overassign. Resist the temptation to pile on work. Work is not a virtue in and of itself. Quality of attention is what you're aiming at, not burn-out.
- Offer what you have. Don't waste time worrying that your thoughts aren't good enough. A structure for people to use in organizing their thoughts, to oppose, to get their teeth into is what is needed. Not *War and Peace*.
- Don't be afraid to try new things. This is a hard one for me. I'm always afraid a new idea will flop. So it flops. At least it provides variety and keeps things moving. I call this the Shirley MacLaine Principle: if you want to get the fruit from the tree, you have to go out on a limb.
- Let go. Don't hang on to what's just happened, good or bad. In some situations you probably can't tell which is which anyway, so let things happen and go on from there. Don't cling to the course, to the students, to your own ideas. There's more where they all came from. (A corollary to this rule is: you can't do it all. The whole point of this approach is that the teacher doesn't do everything.)

Gay Hendricks writes in *The Centered Teacher*:

It is easy, if we view teaching as a one-way street, to fall into the trap of doing more than 50% of the work in the classroom. If we see teachers as having the answers and the students as having the questions we invite an imbalance in the relationship which can only cause a drain on teachers' energy. It is important to have a relationship with students which generates energy for *all* concerned rather than drains it. (27)

Teaching is a service occupation, but it can only work if you discover, at a certain point, how to make teaching serve you. Staying alive in the classroom and avoiding burn-out means finding out what you need from teaching at any particular time. I went from teaching as performance to teaching as a maternal or coaching activity because I wanted to remove myself from center stage and get out of the students' way, to pay more attention to them and less to myself. On an ideological plane, then, you might say I made the move in order to democratize the classroom. But on a practical plane I did it because I was tired. Sometimes, I used to think of my teaching self as the character played by Jane Fonda in a movie about a couple who had entered a dance marathon to earn money during the Depression; it was called *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* In moving from the performance to the coaching model, I was seeking rest.

I'm not suggesting that other teachers should adopt this particular method. There are a million ways to teach. (Nor do I think the method is suitable only for graduate students or students in elite institutions: Freire worked with illiterate peasants). What I'm suggesting are two things. First, what we do in the classroom is our politics. No matter what we may say about Third World this or feminist that, our actions and our interactions with our students week in week out prove what we are for and what we are against in the long run. There is no substitute for practice. Second, the politics of the classroom begins with the teacher's treatment of and regard for him or her self. A kinder, more sensitive attitude toward one's own needs as a human being, in place of a desperate striving to meet professional and institutional standards of arguable merit, can bring greater sensitivity to the needs of students and a more sympathetic understanding of their positions, both as workers in the academy and as people in the wider world.

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