

VISIBLE BORDER CROSSERS: REFLECTIONS ON FACULTY COLLABORATION

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Sometimes our teaching experiences change us in unforgettable ways. In fall 2002, we taught a learning community, *Education for Social Justice*, that combined an education course and a sociology course. Forty-six students enrolled. We had high hopes but the journey was much harder than we had anticipated. We would like to begin by sharing two letters that we wrote to each other shortly after the class was over. Then we describe our learning community in more detail, and how and why the class changed hearts—our students and our own. Perhaps it is no coincidence that our students' hearts were changed precisely because we had the courage to engage our own hearts in the process.

Our Letters: What We Learned

Dear Debora,

It was such an honor and privilege to teach with you. I learned so much—so much about you and your personal geography and so much about my own. We worked, struggled, laughed, and cried together and when all is said and done, I feel we are much closer and a much more powerful team on our campus.

Here is the geography of my experience last quarter. We planned the class together, combining classes we had taught before: my piece was Education 105: Introduction to Education, and your piece was Sociology 150: Multicultural Communication. Together the learning community became Education for Social Justice. Our planning for the class went very smoothly—we worked well together and picked readings and assignments from our repertoire of previous experience. We also created some new things—our final project, for example, was a new creation, coming from a synergy of ideas we had each used before—asking the students to work at a community partnership site, keep a journal, do a research project (in teams) on a social justice issue coming out of their site work, develop a social action project (in teams), and document and reflect on these experiences.

As the quarter started, I was impressed by your use of “Theatre of the Oppressed” activities and we used these each week to get students

on their feet, moving and engaging in physical representations of some of the issues that our classwork raised. I was also impressed by your presence in the classroom—you are a powerful person and bring so much of yourself to your teaching. Slowly but surely, we moved from “comfortable” to “uncomfortable” territory for many of the students, and I’ll admit, for me as well. We began to discuss issues of racism, classism, sexism—not from an historical perspective, but from a perspective of how power and privilege play out in the world we currently inhabit. You and I worked as a powerful team: you as a woman of color, I as an ally but someone who has rarely been a victim of oppression, walking with privilege most of my life.

We began to notice ways that power and privilege were sometimes obstacles in our own work as co-teachers. For example, students who were not comfortable approaching or confronting you would only visit me during office hours, perhaps hoping for a sympathetic ear as they were challenged to confront their own power and privilege. You and I spoke of this but it was hard for me to see or hear—nevertheless, I respected you and your perception and we began holding office hours together most days to interrupt these patterns.

I also noticed that we had different ways of teaching about issues of diversity. Given that I am not a person of color, most of my teaching about issues of diversity and education is not based in personal experience, but rather in what I have learned from books, videos, and observations. Our passions and interests overlapped to a great extent, but we had different lenses on the issues. I would often bring in a video, or give a mini-lecture with charts and graphs, for example, showing drop-out rates of students of color. You would then add your perspective to my presentations, providing first-person accounts to help students understand the emotional experience of oppression. Sometimes, I felt that my contributions were rather dry and sterile in comparison to the “real life” lens that you provided.

Our styles of communication and working were also different, more so than I had expected, given that we’ve worked as colleagues for three years. I tended to come to class with a fairly strict plan of what we would do and I found you to be more spontaneous—willing to modify the plan to respond to the energy of the moment and the needs of the students. There were days when I was uncomfortable, feeling that my contribution was pushed to the side, and I began to chafe internally. We spoke of this a few times, but it was a sore subject and our conversations often led to hurt feelings and misunderstandings. We also had different systems of grading and were trying to merge our

two approaches. One day I gave you some instructions and I came across as patronizing. You told me that I was treating you as if you didn't have a brain in your head and I began to cry. We hugged and talked for a long time and I tried to reflect on how I was communicating with you. I interrogated myself about whether I was judging you as not being as "organized" as I was.

About halfway through the quarter, I remember feeling very tense and somewhat jealous about the way students responded to you with amazing love and respect—you command attention in a way that I never will—and it occurred to me how much I have to learn from you. I decided to stop struggling for control, and instead to relax and enjoy being in the space with you and the students. I tried to follow your lead and respond to the students instead of bringing in a rigid plan for the day. Our communication improved and we were able to speak honestly to each other about how we felt. We still had our struggles from time to time, but the energy had shifted and we were much more in tune with each other.

In a way, our struggles matched what was going on with our students. Although we were not completely open about the challenges we faced working together, or our different life experiences and cultural styles, we shared some of this with students. The class changed. Early on we had been met with a great deal of resistance, but mid-way through the quarter, the energy shifted for many students. Most became engaged and seemed to be changing their perspectives in some very deep ways. I feel fortunate to have been a witness to this and to have shared in the experience. There were days in class where students cried at the injustices they were seeing in their off-campus work. Students were beginning to care about social justice; their lives were changing.

The last day of class, we sat in a circle and each of us spoke about what the class had meant to us. I was moved to tears by the fact that some of the students who initially carried a façade of being callow, hard-hearted, and resistant to the messages of our class broke down and cried about how our class had changed their lives. I have never, in all my years of teaching, felt so good about what happened in a class. And I think that our struggles played a substantial role in enabling students to engage in a similar struggle.

Thank you Debora, for staying the course with me—for pushing and challenging me, for giving me the space to do the work I needed and wanted to do, and for your amazing unconditional love and forgiveness. What I take away:

- a much deeper understanding of power and privilege and how it

plays out in my life and the lives around me;
- a much deeper understanding that when we plan learning communities, we need to have a clear vision of the different lenses we bring—it is not enough to divide up the content. We may address the same content but bring different ways of knowing to that content. I need to interrogate myself carefully to make sure I don't subtly suggest that one way of knowing is superior to another;
- a much deeper understanding of some of my own control issues and how they can get in my way when working closely with others;
- a much deeper understanding of transformative educational experiences and how serendipitous and ephemeral they can be. I learned to stay open to possibilities and to chance happenings; and
- a fundamental re-affirming of my own belief in the power of love and keeping an open heart. We never gave up. Even when we were hurting and angry, we continued to engage with one another and to believe in the possibility of successfully negotiating these border crossings.

~ Catherine

* * *

Dear Catherine,

“Today we say enough; no longer will we live on bended knees.”

Zapatistas, postcard from Chiapas, Mexico

how can i speak to this experience...to the boundaries, to the barriers, to the border lands...disrupting, contesting...how can you teach with me in a way that does not replicate colonial relationships? how can i teach with you and not blame you and mark you white? how does one teach one's lived experience and not have that marginalized and relegated to the realm of emotion? i challenge you to see my lived experience as theoretical production, theory as a mode of resistance from my specific location or position...and how do i teach from a blood space, a bone space? i crave to remain unmasked, raw, heart exposed...and i look at you and i am reminded of entitlement, privilege seeping deep, i envied your ability to put your experience at the center in every situation...i saw in you the reasons why my presence in academia is without rest...yet we came together...promising, as Adrienne Rich says, to go that long hard way together...when we committed to the creation of this learning community i am not sure we envisioned the depths to which this would push us against each other's reality...i remember telling you we would have to do together what we were

asking our students to do...to negotiate the space of our differences...education for social justice...how we pushed against each other...attempting to create a space to make meaning of the multiple spaces of oppressions across our different race, culture, ethnicity, and class place...through my tears you seemed so far away...our lived experience so far away from each other's...it would have been so much easier to rest on the surface and yet for me and you impossible...and where did i struggle? i struggled to trust...i struggled to believe you would stay during the times of discomfort when you could so easily walk away and your place in this world would not be changed...i witnessed you contract...white liberalism tasted sour against my xicana/ india tongue...

and my belly is swollen, ready to give birth, all that i learned germinating pushing against pelvis...waiting for the moment...embryonic fluid, rich clear milk of my body...release from these plump tissues what knowing has been constructed...i will hold it to my breasts...nurtured on the lives of my ancestors...i cannot and could not turn away and the deeper we worked the deeper our students engaged...i was witnessing a miracle and the power of education.

i have learned to find the crack in the armoring of my heart...i have learned to forgive...i have learned that i am not as assimilated as i thought...i learned that we must build strong partnerships, become strong allies if we are to create a culture of peace and nonviolence...and that it has to begin with us, you and me...for the seventh generation...i realize that my intensity is razor sharp and bone deep and i learned that people like me do not normally find themselves in the position i now walk...my presence and voice a constant reminder...and yes i live with a sense of urgency...this urgency born in a remembrance of my life before academia and my people's lives bending, as Gloria Anzaldúa says, under the hot sun...how dare i dream? how dare i not dream? i feel you were not prepared for all of who i am and my dear friend i thank you for not going away, or at least for coming back...and i thank you for coming to understand that bigger than you or me is the struggle for justice, for liberation, for democracy...my commitment to the struggle does not mean i disrespect you in any manner, but what it means is i will not compromise my commitment to the struggle for the liberation of my people and all people for your or my comfort...

i remember the day i read from the narratives of the wounded knee massacre...i had to pause, tears burning against the reality and the students many also unable to deny tears...they made the link in that moment...from the narrative which spoke to soldiers cutting the wombs

out of las mujeres indias to the india teacher sitting in front of them...whom they had grown to love...in that moment they knew it was my/our/their wombs, it was my/our/their humanity...i thank you for giving us the space to go to those depths...i know this required a lot of trust from you...and i thank you for going that long hard way with me...you had to carry the weight/burden of a history of genocide, oppression, rape, hunger, torture against my people and other peoples of color that i placed on you...for my wounds are so close to the surface, the scabs oozing and when we collided i bled again, so easily and it was not you but what you represented to my lived experience...in order to work as intimately as this required i had to forgive, i had to forgive 500 years and not forget...gracias...for our struggle has carved out a space in my heart and in our students' hearts that can not be erased or made invisible...and this is how we change, poco a poco, in small ENORMOUS doable acts...

i offer this reflection with love, and respect for my teaching partner who had the courage and heart to go "that long hard way together" and to our courageous students who went with us. They are leaders towards a new vision where peace and democracy are a reality and possibility for all.

~ Deborah

As our letters to one another suggest, the importance of introducing concepts of privilege and power, the situatedness of any one perspective, and the nature of collaboration that may follow, cannot be overstated. As Adrienne Rich (1979) reminds us:

An honorable human relationship—that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word “love”—is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other.

It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation.

It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity.

It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us.

Our Learning Community

Our intention in designing *Education for Social Justice* was to create an opportunity for our students and ourselves to develop new knowledge about social justice and social change. We organized the curriculum so we could explore the social justice movement through the lenses of education and multicultural studies. We wrote in our syllabus that we would: explore the historical, socio-cultural, and philosophical foundations of education; explore concepts of race, class, gender, culture, power, and privilege and how these concepts play out in societal and educational settings; examine the relationship of critical issues in culture and education from our place, the local, to the global and back to the local; and work together to construct knowledge and engage in action to transform the conditions under which we live and realize our place in becoming active global citizens. We also let students know that their learning would be informed by reading and researching as well as by participating in a community-based project outside of class.

This project became a big component of the learning community. We shifted our language and practice from “service learning” to that of “community partnership” in order to challenge the baggage inherent in the notion of “service.” Our students were required to spend a minimum of ten hours establishing a community partnership at a community agency with an educational mission. Central to this part of class was critical self-reflection. We posed several sets of questions to begin a dialogue on what it means to enter communities not our own from our privileged places. In order to help students reflect on their own cultural background, we used autobiography in an assignment called “mapping our personal geography,” in which students brought in artifacts and wrote about their own cultural traditions. All quarter, students wrote journals and essays in which they connected their learning in class to their work in the community.

While students did this deep work, we paralleled what we asked our students to do, alone and together, including our critical self-reflections. Our work as teaching partners became increasingly powerful in shaping the experience within the learning community. We had to negotiate the space of race and class, and we had to have the courage to go “there” with each other.

As part of students’ final project and portfolio, they had to demonstrate that they were able to:

- enter into a community-based partnership where all partners benefited from the experience;

- engage with and think critically about a social justice issue they felt passionately about, including researching the issue and becoming an agent for positive change within the community;
- discover how to take classroom/academic knowledge, make personal meaning of it, and apply it to their life and work;
- work both individually and with a group; and
- communicate their learning to others.

For the project, we asked students to work in groups of three or four, and select a site where they would each work at least one hour a week. Students attended an orientation at their sites and wrote a reflection based on that experience. Group members were to question each other and themselves about their expectations, fears, joys, and assumptions about the site prior to beginning work. The answers to these questions, the orientation materials, and the reflection on orientation became the first part of a portfolio due during the second week of the quarter.

Once students started working at the site, they were asked to keep a journal about their work, making observations and posing questions—including questions about assumptions, biases, and stereotypes at play in their own thinking, in their colleagues' thinking, or at the site itself. Students also kept a log documenting their attendance at the site. These journals, reflections, interrogations, and documentation of hours became the second part of their portfolio.

As students became more familiar with their community partner, they were asked to identify one social justice issue that was being played out at the site. They were to discuss the issue with their group members and in conference with one instructor, in order to make connections between what they were observing and what they were studying in class. Working on the Internet and with scholarly sources in the library, students were asked to write a group research paper providing background on the issue. Interviews with people in the community could be used as part of the data for the research paper, and groups were asked to give presentations about their issue near the end of the quarter.

The penultimate step of the project invited students to work with community partners to become agents for change, to put learning into action to make a positive difference. The project could take the form of a web site, zine, or video to inform the broader public. It could take the form of an action such as creating a dinner for the hungry in the community, developing a fund-raising idea, or organizing a demonstration. The main criteria were that it would put learning to use for the good of the community, that it be done in partnership with

the community, and that students discuss it with the instructors before proceeding. Students were asked to document their work by writing about their own thinking, their group's process, and the community process. This reflection also became the basis for class presentations.

The final step in the process for students was to write a reflective essay focusing on what they learned, in particular on the ways their classroom-based work, their community-based work, and their group projects informed their learning overall. Students were asked to comment on how the experience had changed them, and on what they would take forward from this learning into their life and work.

We grounded our classroom practice in critical pedagogy and critical literacy theory based on the work of Paulo Freire, Antonia Darder, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, and Peter McLaren. Critical pedagogy can be defined in many ways. For us, the definition that carries most weight is Giroux's idea that "pedagogy in the critical sense illuminates the relationship among knowledge, authority, and power" (Giroux 1994). In particular, Giroux notes that critical pedagogy examines how matters of audience, voice, power, and evaluation work to construct relations between teachers and students and between classrooms and communities. According to Darder (1991):

Critical Pedagogy refers to an educational approach rooted in the tradition of critical theory. Critical educators perceive their primary function as emancipatory and their primary purpose as commitment to creating the conditions for students to learn skills, knowledge, and modes of inquiry that will allow them to examine critically the role that society has played in their self-formation. More specifically, critical pedagogy is designed to give students the tools to examine how society has functioned to shape and constrain their aspirations and goals, and prevent them from even dreaming about a life outside the one they presently know.

The required texts for the class were *Teaching to Change the World* (Oakes and Lipton 2002), *Teaching for Social Justice* (Ayers, Hunt, and Quinn 1998), and the compilation of articles, *Rethinking Our Classrooms, Vol. 1* (Bigelow, et al., eds. 1994). Additional articles were placed on reserve for students. These texts were difficult for first-year college students, and our students had many questions, but they rose to the challenge. They didn't always agree with the perspectives of the authors and we had many lively classroom debates where students

honed their critical thinking skills as they grappled with multiple perspectives.

We were able to reserve a large classroom for our learning community. We arranged tables and chairs in blocks toward the front of the room, and left an open space in the rear where we could easily bring our chairs into a circle or have an open space for our theatre of the oppressed work. Throughout the course we engaged the class in theatre of the oppressed activities using the work of Augusto Boal. We felt that moving away from the spoken word and allowing the body to speak might shift the dynamics of a predominately “white” classroom. We are always concerned when we begin the dialogues on “race” in a predominately “white” class, and we struggle with how to make the classroom space multi-centered so the students of color would not be made to feel obligated to act as “cultural informants.” We found that using this work allowed all participants to feel safe expressing their thoughts and feelings while disrupting comfort zones. At particularly tough moments in the classroom we would pause and move into the theatre of the oppressed work, always finishing in a circle to process what we had just experienced.

The course was a very difficult one to teach and the letters that we wrote to each other attest to some of the struggles that we faced in trying to unravel the subtle strands of power and privilege that exist between and among us. Nonetheless, no doubt because of these struggles, the course was meaningful to both instructors and students at a very deep level. The students taking our class were primarily younger students who came to our community college from the surrounding suburbs. Most of them had attended suburban schools and most of them were white. They had read about injustice but for most of them, injustice was far removed from their experience. For their community-based learning, our students partnered with a number of different community agencies and most were interacting with children from the Mexican immigrant and/or refugee community.

Through this community partnership, the students were given the opportunity to see injustice in a way that many of them had never seen it before. For example, one of the agencies we worked with was attempting to develop an after-school program for parents and children in the immigrant community. They were offering after-school activities and tutoring in an apartment complex where many Mexican immigrant and/or refugee families lived, using the apartment recreation center as physical space to house the program (with permission from the apartment manager). Midway through the quarter, the apartment

manager told the Americorps volunteers who were spearheading the project that they could no longer use the recreation center and would have to rent an apartment if they wanted to continue an onsite program.

It might be helpful to put this situation in context for the reader. The demographics in this affluent, suburban, high-tech corridor in northeast King County, outside of Seattle, Washington, have been changing dramatically. The immigrant and/or refugee populations have increased at a fast rate, and with the changing demographics comes the resistance of the predominately white community to accept the “browning of the community.” The immigrant and/or refugee community here often faces exploitation, tenants’ rights violations, racism, poverty, and more. By the time the programs were shut down our students who were working at the site had developed relationships with the families and were given the opportunity to witness an experience of the families they had grown to love, many of whom felt too vulnerable to protest the decision even though they were paying rent which ostensibly included access to the recreation center. We will never forget this group of students presenting what had happened to the class, many of them in tears, asking their classmates how we could raise money to rent an apartment so that the after-school program could be saved. For us, this was a moment where the distance between the students’ privileged place and the reality of the lived experiences of the people the students had grown to love was shattered. We knew in that moment that they would be changed deeply and would not be able to go back to “I did not know”; it is in these moments, when we are educated for liberation. It is not enough for us to remain in the abstract space of academia. In creating partnerships with multiple communities, students can actually witness how people’s lives and their own are affected by the systems and institutions that we often participate in without questioning their effects, both locally and globally.

When we received our student evaluations at the end of the quarter, they provided evidence of the growth our students had experienced. Twenty-nine of the forty-six students completed the evaluations. On the numerical ratings, students were very generous, giving us an average score of 4.95 out of a possible 5.0 ratings. In answer to the question, “What supported your learning?,” students’ written comments spoke to the meaning of the class for them:

This is the most amazing class I’ve ever been in! My level of critical thinking and social justice has deepened so much. The issues were important.

The class allowed us to think critically about topics and broadened points of view that are not looked at in our society.

This class is a model demonstration of Cascadia's learning outcomes. We as students were part of the teaching and critical pedagogy.

Diversity of teaching styles made coming to class a pleasure. Having both linear and random teachers, especially these two, gave me the opportunity to work in and out of my comfort zone which provided a challenge to me and kept me motivated.

This course helped me understand this school's learning outcomes and the intentions behind them. This was the best learning environment I have ever participated in. I am so thankful to have had these teachers.

Interacting in classroom discussions, hearing multiple points of view, getting first-hand experiences, textbooks, papers, handouts, other groups' presentations, and the open-minded support of teachers was great.

When asked what interfered with learning, there were fifteen brief comments including statements like these:

Some people in the class are close-minded.

The quarter was too short. This class should have another level.

Where do we turn with questions when you are not around?

Not every viewpoint is considered in the course materials.

Students who participated in our learning community continue to grow. Several students attended the international *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed* conference and presented with Debora. Other students participated in a project building houses for families in Tijuana, Mexico. One of the students has gone on to pursue a social work degree. Several have begun to work on their teaching degrees. One has been actively involved in border issues with friends outside of San Diego, California, and another has changed her major to a human rights interdisciplinary degree. Two students continued to work with Debora for a year after the class in a family literacy project.

As for us, we continue to be in awe of the power of emancipatory education. We take away the knowledge that something important

happened in this class, for us and for our students. If we were to teach the same class again, there is no guarantee that we would get the same magical results. However, the fact that this can happen gives us hope. It is not easy to teach about oppression, power, and privilege to students who have rarely experienced injustice first-hand. It is not easy to do this when only a small number of students in class have intimately experienced oppression, poverty, racism, or exploitation. How do we negotiate the space of this classroom in such a way that all members retain their dignity and integrity? How do we negotiate the space of our class in a manner where we do not sanitize or diminish people's struggle for the sake of order in the classroom? As Darder (1991) asks us: "Do we dare use the word love?"

Many times in courses that attempt to confront issues of race, class, power, and privilege, students engage with the topics superficially, sometimes feeling that they are being "blamed" for a history of oppression, and generally resisting going to a deep level of understanding that might lead them to change their hearts. We were blessed in this experience to see what happens when students cease resisting. They did not all agree with our perspective, and if they had, that would be worrisome. What they did, almost universally, was to open their hearts. The last day of the quarter we sat in a circle and each shared what the course had meant to us. There were few dry eyes in the room. We watched young women as well as young men break down and cry about the injustice in the world that they had been blind to for most of their lives. We listened as they told us how they wanted to make a difference in the world. We listened as they spoke of their understanding about how they have benefited from others' exploitation and we listened as they spoke of their critique of their own comfort and luxury at the expense of others. Together we moved towards a literacy of power and community. What a tremendous gift. This is why we teach and this is why teaching is the strongest political act we can engage in at this moment in our history. Emancipatory education! Education for Liberation! Si Se Puede!

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