

Gettin Schooled

The Politics of Teaching, Writing, and Race

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I'm sitting with my developmental writing class towards the beginning of the semester. There are two white students, eighteen students of color, six international students. It's the exact opposite in my critical thinking class. But we aren't talking race yet; we're talking about language, about writing, about swearing in your papers, about slang. They point out that it's because I'm the teacher that I can encourage them to write in any way they want to. Because they know when they are done with me, they gonna have problems in the next class. It don't matter what we say, but how we say it, they point out. And since you a teacher and Mexican, you can use some spanglish like it's cool and all. When you a professional it's ok, not for us though.

They know about hegemony, about class hierarchies and how language is key to their success, or more precisely, their upward mobility. They tell me they need to lose their accents, and they need to lose their voice. They wanna write white.

I can only nod, wondering how to begin: how to incorporate anarchist solutions to the problems created by institutionalized schooling from within an institution, how to address race and patriarchy, how to stop nodding and be a revolutionary teacher.

“ain't got time for hippy shit”

I consider myself an anarchist teacher of color and a failure. I teach in downtown Berkeley, California at the local community college. I teach English: the development/basic skills classes, the transfer level writing classes, the literature and creative writing classes. I teach an incredibly diverse population of students and attempt to, in all levels, create a student centered, non-hierarchic, non-coercive classroom. I attempt this in a myriad of ways from collaborating on texts we read; to providing multiple, varied, open-ended assignment prompts; to constant requests for input and feedback. I think I have done an incredible job at times inspiring students, creating for them choices that allow their own genuine exploration into ideas, into the meaning of their education, of writing, of voice, of critical consciousness. And I recognize the ways they provide those same possibilities for me.

And yet I still feel like a failure because each semester, each week, I find myself thinking of grades or seeing students acquiesce to the system that they know is bigger than any little cool class or teacher they might happen on. I see them making concessions and I see myself encouraging them to do so at times in order to continue receiving financial aid, in order to just pass the class without making too much of a fuss concerning a tenured colleague's sexist comments. Just take the grade and run. I teach predominantly students of color, many of whom ain't got time for hippy shit, anarchist shit, or anything else, believing the hype that it is schooling that provides access to money, to privilege, to a way out. Many feel forced to be here and know that in the classrooms they powerless, they don't matter, that if they can get by, they a step closer.

anarchism is education

Let me be blunt: the only way to be a revolutionary teacher, a teacher of change, is to recognize that anarchism and education are synonymous. I didn't always. But after teaching now for ten years I see no other way but to attempt to ground the anarchist principles of liberation, autonomy, non-coercion into my teaching. If I can't, I need to just get the fuck out while I still have my soul. I've come to this conclusion because, after initially teaching for a few years, I saw how reformist policies and solutions solved nothing concerning the destructive force of institutionalized education on students, particularly students of color. Teaching, as it was being practiced by those around me and, it seemed, myself, did nothing to liberate and so we blamed the victims, the students, for their apathy, their lack of interest, their failures. They hadn't failed, the institution had (though some argue it succeeded in its goal) and, by implication, we failed. I failed. I felt myself quickly losing my center, my idealism, my belief in the liberating potential of education as it worked for me.

Desperate for inspiration, I continued my own schooling (outside of classrooms, on my own time, with peers) about how to be a teacher, about the politics of teaching. I discovered critical pedagogy on race, autonomy, anarchy by writers such as bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, Victor Villanueva, Paulo Freire. These people saved my faith in the power of working with others, in the potential for revolutionary teaching.

a necessary burden

The vast majority of my students see education as one of two things—a necessary burden to endure, perhaps to enjoy, but ultimately the “key” to a successful business career and, ironically, as the solution to our social ills. They are thankful: they see the institution as providing them their education. When I ask where they learned about love, about self-expression, about friendship, about communication, they acknowledge it was outside of class but that doesn't count, that's not “real” education that can get you anywhere. The other side is that school is fucked. It is oppressive, violent, racist, elitist, preventative, yet something they need to attempt to tackle, though most don't succeed and get spit back out to the streets, to the jails, to the unemployment line. And these two options are split along class lines and, specifically, along lines of race.

How are anarchist principles to combat this? And I'm back full circle to my own struggles to synthesize and connect race, anarchism, education, to theorize yet engage in both the classrooms I teach in and my life outside the classrooms (are those really separate rooms anyway?) I come back to questions of how to be revolutionary in all facets of my life, how to connect how to make change...

When are you black enough?

Let me tell you a story. Is Harriet Jacobs black? a young woman asked in an English 1A class geared for African American students. My initial response when she raised her hand was that I really failed to adequately introduce this text.

Well yes; it's a slave narrative and...

No. I mean is she B-L-A-C-K because you know it makes a difference; I mean there was house niggas and field niggas, an: I woulda been a field nigga but her up in the front row, now she woulda been a house nigga...

The class erupted and discussed and yelled and at the apex of the heated debate about the importance of color within the black community, Renea stands up and says I am just so sick of this shit. I mean how black is black? When are you black enough?

The class fell silent. I could only nod.

I think of my mother telling me to stay out of the sun; I tanned too easily and that required explanation; how dark can you be and still be seen as white; what does it mean to learn your whiteness, your blackness, your race?

And I am tired of nodding. I promised to do something for my students, for myself.

the role of the institution itself

And for me, I can't separate my experiences as a student of color from my writing, from teaching, from anarchist praxis. I have been the affirmative action boy, the one who's hired at 24 fresh out of grad school with little experience but brown skin and an ability to work with "those students." Because I am one, right? Who hears the retiring white male who's supposed to be my mentor question his peers, "but can he really teach?" Yes I can, and teach I did. For the last ten years I have been a full-time English instructor specializing in developmental writing. I'm the one who was asked to develop the African American writing program because, "you work with those other students so well." I'm the one asked to greet the local high schools visiting from the east side because they'll feel more welcome. I am brown; I look like them. But I knew all along that it takes more than just one of us in the department more than two of us. Because I did all this and I still watched students of color fail.

I taught them how to use the academic voice, yet nurtured their alternative, home voices in classes and in papers to help foster a sense of pride and the possibility of options. But I saw students go to Cal or State, and come back tired, exhausted, bored, broken. I promised to do something about it. How had I failed to address issues of race within my teaching practices and within the educational system I was both a product of and an outsider to? When I began teaching, I thought I could make a difference; but now I realize that although I can inspire, radicalize, nurture others, I must also struggle with the complexity of the social and educational system which is built on notions of race that prevent any real change. Reform is not possible without a radical change in our understanding of writing, teaching, and race.

And that understanding, for me, came through my exploration of anarchy. It is the place I have found inspiration in realizing it is not I who provides, but the students. That I must respect and follow my desires to engage in a dialogue with them, to immediately discuss the role of the institution itself, to ask what it is I can do to work with them, to support them, to acknowledge what power I have and don't have. To, first and foremost, state unequivocally that Schooling is unfair and that I have a certain power that I could not break from even if I wanted to unless we walked out the doors. If I do these things immediately, the false dichotomies of Institutionalized Education begin to fall away. But then we as teachers need to replace them by helping to facilitate the students' own awareness, their own critical consciousness of how school works, and then discover how its hierarchical, authoritarian structure is mirrored in life, on the job, in relationships, at the multiple places in which we live our lives.

That's the key; that's the goal for any revolutionary teacher, any anarchist teacher, any teacher of any subject: to demonstrate that critical thinking is not limited to classrooms but extends itself into all our relations; that genuine questioning doesn't end with mathematical theorems or scientific formulas but makes connections to cooking, to poverty, to distribution of food, to Wal-Mart; to embody that practice and involve the students in creating classroom environments that address the intrinsic workings of a group, the historical nature of classroom hierarchy and patriarchy that happen all too often; to ask for suggestions and solutions Genuinely.

And when you divest your authority and invest the students with creating the class they want to be in, you need to be both humble and prepared; you need to be open and honest in dealing with students who suddenly feel comfortable challenging you and your choices, critiquing how you handled a comment about rape, and how you ignored the woman in the corner while you called on the male student who always speaks. You will need to discover ways of working collectively as a group, of devising and instituting protocols so that people are provided a chance to explore their feelings—and it doesn't become a shout fest. And this is one small aspect of classroom management. We, as revolutionary teachers, need to share more of our experiences, more approaches that have been successful in encouraging students to own their education even in classes that are requirements, which no one there even has the freedom to choose not to take.

students immediately smell the bullshit

To me anarchist teaching means recognizing my power in the institution of higher education, not pretending that I am not part of the problem as well. Students immediately smell the bullshit, know when you're fronting. My developmental class had to decide for themselves to write as they want to or as they believe they need to. By trusting

and encouraging their own process of coming to a conclusion, by reading what they say honestly and engaging them in the discussions they want to have, and not what I think they need to have, they begin to trust themselves, their choices, their voices, and eventually you. And when they trust in their own voices, real revolutionary change can and does occur.

I realize that my goal in being a revolutionary teacher, an anarchist teacher, is to move, like the language we use in our lives, between the social structures that tend to divide and exclude. I want to do this in an effort to break them down, I believe, in connection to everyday activities to praxis. If what I do within my own intellectual endeavors doesn't impact my students, doesn't support the people I live on the block with, it don't mean shit. That is why anarchy and education are crucial. We experience them daily. Our interactions are consistently colored by race, racial policies, and stereotypes both from within and without: when I enter the corner liquor store, walk through groups of young men on the street, get pulled over by the cops. They color the way we speak to ourselves and to others. I ask myself what is my authentic voice: this one, the voice I welcome students with, the way I speak to my middle class hippie mother, to my children and lovers, to my father in jail who writes me stories of survival and love. I have come to realize that radical or revolutionary teaching is concerned less about the situation—the classroom, the students, the level, the subject—and more about the process—the practice of critical thinking, critical examination. As radical teachers we can be an integral part of helping students acquire that ability, or as preventative as cops or institutions.

By recognizing our place, being transparent and self-critical while also taking active responsibility for our choices, our policies or actions, we can partake in the active transformation of people in our communities. We can go from nodding to speaking out. And there is no failure in that.

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