

RADICAL TEACHER

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Can Critical Teaching Foster Activism in this Time of Repression?

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by Ira Shor



IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

For my practice of critical teaching, questioning the status quo is the central goal while problem-posing dialogue is the central method. I prefer participatory approaches with subject matters that are local, contemporary, contentious, co-developed, and legible. A local subject matter offers concreteness and immediacy which can help counter the remoteness and abstractness many students assume is the nature of schooling, leading many to tune out as soon as the teacher starts doing education to them. A contemporary subject has the allure of something happening now, which similarly works for concreteness and against remoteness. Contemporary subjects embedded in controversy are also ongoing contentions which can be tracked in real time week to week through the class; some of these contentions are civic embroilments into which those who wish to intervene can choose to do so. In searching for themes that are local, contemporary, and contentious, my habit is to include students through a co-developed syllabus which gives preference to subjects nominated by students. If the remote, abstract nature of schooling involves academic teacher-talk about topics unilaterally chosen by authorities, then a critical-democratic process invites students to select materials for study. Finally, these subject matters, student-based but rigorously examined, need to be legible, in language hospitable to student understanding.

I attempt this method in a large, unpopular, required first-year writing course at my working-class college. With thirty or so students diverse in color, ethnicity, citizenship, and academic preparation, I begin the course with low-stakes writing, saying as little as I have to on the first day especially. Students begin with a "sign-in sheet" which asks for basic info (address, major, employment, etc.) plus answers to questions about what they want from college and from this course; what topics they most want to write and read about; what is good writing in their opinion and how someone becomes a good writer; and what "do's and don't's" for the teacher they would recommend to help them learn more in this course. Students then write a page describing their typical writing process from the moment they get an assignment to the moment they hand in their paper. The sequence moves on to a fifteen- to twenty-minute brainstorm about any topic that currently interests them. Some students say they

do not know what to write about, so I list nine topics as prompts (like the biggest problem now in the U.S. or in New York City, or what working families need to make life easier on them, or how this college can improve their education, etc.). I collect these brainstorms, take them home to read without grading them, and see which if any topics repeat as recurrent student concerns. For the next class, I put any recurring student topics on a ballot and ask students to vote their top choices.

As it happened, "Gay Marriage" and "The Iraq War" emerged as passionate student themes in a recent semester. Those subject matters were voted in as the first items on the syllabus for writing, reading, discussion, and research. I gathered and distributed background data, stats, and readings on marriage and homosexuality, and on the Iraq War, asking students to undertake a sequential research process: identify a topic you want to study, ask what you already know about it, gather new material about the subject, study this new material and prioritize it from most to least valuable for reporting on the topic (explaining in writing how you judged good and bad sources), and choose from each selected source several excerpts to quote in your report, indicating why you chose those excerpts and how to use them in a report.

In class, I began discussion of gay marriage with two editorial cartoons published in local papers, asking students to write a comparison of the meaning in the two texts. After a writing period in class, they first read comparisons in groups of two for peer discussion, then reported to the class as a whole on which cartoon was pro- or anti-gay marriage, how they knew, and which they agreed or disagreed with. For the Iraq War theme, I began with an anonymous student questionnaire about what each currently knew and felt about this war, costs in human life and in money, why it began, how it's going, etc., then provided various data bases and background readings on these issues. Of course, such themes led to some discomfort in class because of the strong views held on different sides. Several weeks of reading, writing, discussion, and drafting papers occurred for each theme, which led into the final disturbing topic of "Jobs, Social Class, and the Economy," clued into their identities as working-class students in college to improve their financial status in an age of runaway globalization and raging increases in inequality.

On the whole, I'd say that this method is a demanding introduction to writing, reading, and discussion at the college level. Students chose the topics for the syllabus and the research process which did NOT include polemical lectures from me about what things mean. Rather, I let the data bases, charts, stats, and articles speak to students as the students struggled to make life-sense of numbers and trend lines and in-depth stories on what is happening to the economy. "Research" here was not an abstract or ritual schmooze through steps but a disturbing process of provocative questions raised by virtually any topic in our society.



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