

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Critical Creativity

by Sophie Bell



DE-MIL-I-TA-RISE | wearedissenters.org Together We Grow a New Path Andrea Narno, 2020

TOGETHER WE GROW A NEW PATH BY ANDREA NARNO VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG (2021)

This issue of *Radical Teacher* looks at the critical creativity radical teachers are marshaling, and have marshaled, in confronting and combating the interlocking crises we face in our classrooms, our campuses and schools, and our world. Such critical creativity was exemplified by Saul Slapikoff (1932-2022), one of *Radical Teacher's* staunchest members and the only Biology professor to serve on our board. Alongside new essays, we have collected in this issue a representative sample of Saul's work (as well as Susan O'Malley's thoughtful tribute) to honor his legacy and foundational role at *Radical Teacher*.

Saul appreciated crises. In fact, he deliberately sought out -- and combined -- "possible strategies and arenas for struggle" in order to fight towards justice. As he writes in his Teaching Note on the volume *Ecology as Politics*, "If we are to avoid technofascism as well as ecological collapse, the struggles for democratic socialism and for an ecologically sound society must be made one." He searched out arenas in which to forge movement work on multiple fronts: organizing workers on railroads and in biology labs, organizing students and faculty in protesting against the Vietnam War and for American Studies (read his astounding account of much of his lifetime work in his "A Course on Bio-Social Problems and How I Came to Teach It"), and ultimately, playwriting for Palestine.

Across all these sites of struggle, Saul found that storytelling was the universal factor that made political work -- indeed, all work -- possible. Counterintuitively, he described storytelling as the heart of radical science: "It is not enough to expose the racism, sexism, and classism that underlie much of biological and behavioral science, or to draw the connections between much of the work in the physical and chemical sciences and the Department of Defense and multinational corporations. It is as important, if we are to demystify science, to develop the understanding that science -- even good science -- as a creative human activity has an ideological content. Scientists, no less than novelists or poets, are storytellers. Their stories are based, at best, on unbiased data obtained by verifiable procedures which are then organized and given meaning by the application of creative imagination."

Saul acknowledged the difficulty of a transdisciplinary approach to study and movement work. In his review of *Ecology as Politics*, he called it "a difficult book for many students -- not for its language, but for its daring integration of issues." He shows at once the thrill and challenge of asking students "to bring together such diverse issues as ecology, politics, labor, imperialism, and health within a single worldview. When the author Gorz does so, Saul describes how this "so thoroughly challenges deeply held views about the nature of capitalism and of 'socialism' as we have come to know it that [students] are initially stunned." Finally, he announces the value in only for "those students ready to suffer the discomfort along with the excitement of new insights."

Saul always looked for the class analysis in science teaching. In his film review of the documentary *Song of the Canary*, Saul points out how "its sensitive portrayal of the lives and feelings of the workers involved," allows the film to "transcend its focus on occupational safety and health

issues and should be a useful addition to any course that deals with the lives of workers and the meaning of work in modern corporate America." In his article, "Health Care and Science Teaching," he argued persuasively: "Health has been transformed for us from a state of being to a commodity to be purchased."

Our current crises, seen through Saul's eyes, represent more opportunities for organizing. Seeing his work alongside new publications connects those radical teachers of today to Saul's search "a viable movement capable of engaging significant numbers of students in the struggle for a democratic, egalitarian, socialist future..." That search goes on.

This issue is for radical teachers who, like Saul, recognize crisis as the context for teaching with voracious creativity and commitment to collective action wherever they can find it. This issue bears witness to the ways that radical teachers are sparking students' critical consciousness, amplifying their voices while inspiring them to critique ideological doxa they've unknowingly ingested, bringing in collaborators from archives and communities outside the classroom to make the work richer and more impactful, learning from and with our students, and tapping into writing's artistic and analytical capacities to create new knowledge.

Each of these essays documents and critiques the oppressive conditions of our students' lives and their educations. They are deeply critical, testifying to the difficult, sometimes paralyzing contexts in which we meet our students: in educational institutions that don't value our labor and/or theirs; in a political climate that devalues and defunds public education at all levels; under legislation and threatened legislation that attempts to silence any teaching that asks students to look at the structural inequalities in their lives, let alone to address them. [Each group of racially, ethnically, culturally, linguistically marginalized and historically and currently oppressed people are fighting actively on battlegrounds to defend lives, lands, work, rights, climate.]

Yet these pieces are best characterized by their critical creativity -- critical on the one hand because they offer critiques of oppressive conditions, and on the other because creativity is critical to responding effectively to such conditions. They are largely focused on work that took place within classrooms -- three classrooms in colleges and one in a middle school (stay tuned for our next issue, which offers a greater look at work outside and around classrooms).

These authors invite us to tap into creative resistance in co-creating knowledge with our students to navigate the crises that we face. As editors, these articles all caused us to pause in our reading and jot down notes, sketching out or revising assignments for our own classes. We hope they will cause you to do the same. They might also inspire you to email a colleague with whom you've always wanted to collaborate and explore that possibility. Either way, they offer vital practical and theoretical contributions to critically creative radical teaching in times when racial capitalism is damaging all our futures.

The approaches in these essays are widely divergent, but they all involve some or all of the following: combining text and non-textual elements, student collaboration, interdisciplinarity, collaborations between teaching and library professionals, opportunities for publication within or outside class. And they all describe students and faculty creating infectiously critical work.

In Jeane Scheper's "Zine Pedagogies: Students as Critical Makers," zines become a rich metaphor and an actual set of practices for creative resistance. Scheper hopes readers will "approach the essay like a zinester," in a DIY spirit of idiosyncratic meaning-making and critical community building informed principally by queer and feminist, but also antiracist, epistemologies. According to Scheper, zine pedagogy supports "traditional collegiate skills like scholarly research, database searching, close reading, critical thinking, applied methods, and analytic writing," while offering a "radical version of pedagogy understood as mutual learning, cooperative skill-sharing, and a dialogic process that students, librarians, archivists, and professors enter together with both seriousness and joy." We challenge you to read this article without wanting to make a zine yourself, or ask your students to try it.

In "Power Relations and Experiential Learning," Daniel Hengel locates his classroom in a radical pedagogical genealogy of experiential education that propels creative student critique. Arguing that his students in an underfunded urban public university hold expertise in what Claudia Rankine calls "quotidian struggles against dehumanization," he focuses on pushing back against the specific dehumanizing pressure, exerted by an increasingly vocationalized humanities curriculum, to blunt their imaginative and critical capacities. For him, his students' creativity is a crucial accelerant to their conscientization. In a semester-long multimodal digital project, he asks students to make power relations legible in a site or sites they inhabit in their daily lives. The projects students create are themselves compelling, but his focus remains on the internal and collaborative work the students do to develop their critical consciousness, individually and collectively.

In "Disrupting Data: Critical Reading, Technology Integrated Assignments, and Engaged Student Learning," Mt. Holyoke Latina/o Studies faculty Vanessa Rosa and Research and Instructional Librarian Caro Pinto offer another epicenter for creative critical work by students -- a collaboration between classroom and library faculty to establish a framework for students to engage data digitally. Their collaboration's intersecting genealogies in liberatory pedagogies and critical information literacy offer tools for students in a course titled "Race, Racism, and Power" to engage with dehumanizing and disturbing data, but also to "disrupt" that data through presenting and sharing it with one another.

They offer students individual and collective opportunities "to grapple with multiple layers of course content by simultaneously troubling how we conceptualize

data while also visualizing concepts like intersectionality, institutional racism, or the school-to-prison-pipeline." Students work together in ways modeled on Rosa and Pinto's own "equitable and collaborative" working relationship between faculty and librarian, they encourage collaboration among students "to center their own expertise and embodied knowledge" in creative engagements with data.

Unlike the other essays here, Sean Golden's creative energies in "Toward a Grotkean Pedagogy: Teacher as Political" focus on developing himself as a teacher who holds multiple marginalized positions that prevent him from having a robust genealogy of models of "teacher as political" that imagine people like himself at the front of the room. He traces the ways that school leaders, other teachers, available curricula, and parents prevent his ability to grow in the ways he needs to support his students, and how reparative reading helps fill the silences and erasures needed for him to do this work. In order to support the radical teaching he is beginning to do in the classroom, he performs "reparative readings" on the resources and materials at hand that will allow him to develop the pedagogy he needs.

Golden's key figure is Miss Alordayne Grotke -- a racially Other teacher (fandom sites debate whether she is Black or South Asian) who played a small role in Disney's late-1990s animated series "Recess." Her clear political commitments to feminism, decolonial efforts, environmentalism, and her support of her students' concerns and self-advocacy become resources here for Golden to create a teaching persona and teaching methodology that can humanize, make visible, and galvanize. The work is then passed on to students, affording them opportunities to do the same.

This essay calls for teachers to assemble resources for teaching politically when the system doesn't see or support you or your students. We found ourselves asking who occupied our own teaching genealogies -- in our own educations and in popular culture. And we could imagine asking our students the same thing. Some of our responses will be necessarily idiosyncratic. But the cultural images we may have consumed collectively make influences we can analyze collectively.

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