

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Making Space for Radical Pedagogy

by Michael Bennett



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I say it so often that it has become a joke amongst my friends and loved ones. Whenever anyone has a complaint about anything (work, relationships, lack of sleep, anxiety, ...), my rhetorical question is "You know what I blame?" In unison, we say together "Capitalism!" It would be funny if it weren't true.

Capitalism shapes everything we think and do. One of the most nefarious effects of capitalism is that it colonizes our bodies and minds, as well as the spaces we inhabit. How many relationships have you seen that fall to pieces because of arguments over money, or people who break up or never even go on a first or second date because one has fewer resources or a less prestigious job than the other? You know what I blame! How many sleepless nights have you or people you know had because they are endlessly worried about making ends meet? You know what I blame! How many students fall through the cracks thanks to those twin enemies of radical teaching: teaching to the test, which is encouraged by the conservative regime of Learning Outcomes Assessment (LOA), and what Paolo Freire famously called the banking model of education, which views students as empty vessels to be filled up with ruling-class ideology. You know what I blame!

It makes me especially angry to see young people subjected to educational spaces devoted to creating docile workers, rather than to freeing the minds of students to critically examine the world around them. How sad when students fail at what passes for education in the teaching to the test/LOA/banking model, and at the same time how heart-wrenching to see them succeed at it. How especially sad to see students who struggle get blamed for their own supposed deficiencies rather than blaming the structures around them that all but assure some students will rule the market while others become its victims. In an essay in this journal that I co-authored with my friend and *Radical Teacher* comrade Jackie Brady, we wrote that "the problems our students face with outcomes ... are most directly and intimately connected to inputs: inadequate college preparation; extensive family obligations; working at minimum (or sub-minimum) wages; student debt; a corporatized educational system at odds with academic labor; inadequate healthcare and nutrition; lack of access to social, cultural, and economic capital" (150). In short, the space of the classroom is blamed for the problems created outside that space by the depredations of capital, which also assaults and dominates the classroom space, unless resisted by radical teachers.

This issue of *Radical Teacher* focuses on the ways, big and small, in which radical teachers try to resist the hegemonic presence of capitalism by carving out a liberatory educational space, whether in existing institutions or by building new ones. Left theorists have often tried to name and advocate for such spaces of resistances to capitalism and its companions (racism, classism, sexism, ...). Though Marx theorized that the end of capitalism was an historical inevitability, those following in his footsteps have had to think about how to create spaces within capitalism to transform and challenge it when the mechanisms of dialectical materialism did not cause capitalism to come crashing down.

Theories that have been helpful for me and my socialist comrades include Gramsci's notion of counter-hegemony as "a creation of an alternative hegemony on the terrain of civil society in preparation for political change" (Pratt). The topic of such counterhegemonic spaces in both formal and informal educational settings today is taken up in an excellent recent collection: *Creating Third Spaces of Learning for Post-Capitalism: Lessons from Educators, Artists, and Activists*. After Gramsci, in the late 1960s, Jürgen Habermas offered the conception of the public sphere as the place where autonomous individuals come together in a nongovernmental discursive space to establish political and communicative norms that might bring about structural transformations. Nancy Fraser and others critiqued Habermas for imagining that there was just one public sphere as opposed to several "subaltern counterpublics," which Fraser defined as "parallel discursive arenas where members of the subordinated social group invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (123). I found Fraser's formulation especially helpful when thinking about the radical abolition movement as perhaps the first and probably the most impactful counterculture in U.S. history (Bennett 21). Homi Bhabha's conception of "Third spaces" and Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "borderlands" have been helpful for those of us trying to think about hybrid spaces where new identities and social relations emerge between our lived experiences and the authoritarian forces, including capitalism, that contain and restrain us. When it comes to thinking about how all this theorizing applies to education, we continue to be haunted by that presiding spirit of radical teachers everywhere: Paulo Freire. In opposition to the banking concept of education, Freire posits a "problem-posing" education" (66) that helps students develop a "critical consciousness" or "conscientização," which the translator of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* defines as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire 19).

These are rather grand and impressive theories about building spaces resistant to the control of capitalism and other authoritarianisms, but most radical teachers exist within very confined spaces where only small victories can be won in practice. However, *Radical Teacher* has long championed and celebrated praxis, the belief that theory has little meaning separated from the practices that embody it. And so we champion and celebrate the teachers represented in this issue, who are engaging in various practices that embody theories trying to shape the radical spaces where change happens.

Some of the contributors to this issue focus their attention on how to create liberatory spaces within traditional academic practices and classroom settings. In "Teaching and Learning a Joyful Citation Praxis: Affective Relations for Fostering Community Through Our Compositions," Kylie E. Quave and Savannah Hagen Ohbi explore how an academic practice as seemingly innocuous as citation can become transformative. This reflective essay suggests that teaching and learning about citations doesn't have to be a fear-filled practice of policing the

boundaries of a discipline and jailing those who improperly cite accepted authorities. Rather, it can be a joyful practice of finding and engaging with kindred spirits. True to their theory about citations, Quave and Ohbi end their essay with a long acknowledgement to the community who have made this not just “their” essay but the product of co-creators working together to resist the way that “authorship functions as currency: attaching one’s name to an argument lends one legitimacy and capital.”

The spirits of Paulo Freire and Gloria Anzaldúa hover over Jesica Siham Fernández’s “Developing Classroom Community Agreements to Cultivate a Critically Compassionate Learning Community.” Freire would no doubt approve of the ways in which Fernández resists the banking concept of education by forming a “critically compassionate learning community” with classroom community agreements arrived at through collaboration between students and teacher. That this process happens in Fernández’s class offering an “Introduction to Latinx Studies” calls to mind the fact that Anzaldúa’s concept of the “borderlands” was developed out of her experience as a Chicana woman developing a mestiza consciousness from living at la frontera, where hybridity is born. Fernández and her students see it as their project to build safe and brave spaces that put into practice what another radical educational theorist, bell hooks, names as an “education for freedom.”

What could be a more traditional school subject than algebra? Algebra is all too often used as the gatekeeper course for allowing students to graduate from high school or enter into college. Yet, Jay Gillen’s essay “The Educational Radicalism of Bob Moses” argues that the Algebra Project, founded in 1982 by former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretary Bob Moses to bring a different way of teaching algebra to predominantly African American and Latinx middle schools, was and is a radical project. For many students, the algebra classroom is a space of fear. Gillen asks, “Why choose one of the most hated and disempowering locations in already hated and disempowering schools?” Gillen’s answer is that though the public facing goal of the Algebra Project was to promote the radical pedagogy of classroom democracy in order to make it easier to learn math, Moses’s goal was the opposite: to use a new way of teaching math as an organizing tool for young people to learn the practice of radical democracy. Thus, Gillen argues, the feared space of the algebra classroom is transformed into an empowering space where young people build a sense of educational insurgency in the battle to destroy the American caste system.

Rather than focusing on radical interventions in traditional classroom settings, the other essays in this issue of *Radical Teacher* look at efforts to build spaces outside of such settings. The premise of Jennifer Queenan, et. al’s “Learning from Our History: The Role of the New York Collective of Radical Educators in Movements for Educational Justice” is that educator activists can play an important role in transforming not only what happens inside classrooms but also in larger educational systems. This essay, co-written by a group of activists within the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE),

analyzes the role of NYCoRE outside of and in solidarity with union spaces to theorize about the role of educator collectives in education justice movements. The essay focuses on NYCoRE’s efforts to support radical teachers in New York City inside the classroom (professional development focused on social justice curricula) and outside of the classroom (political education building bridges to other organizations working for educational justice), including the role of several core members of NYCoRE in founding the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE) in 2012, which now operates as the social justice caucus within the United Federation of Teachers. However, the authors also examine the commonalities of NYCoRE with teacher collectives and progressive caucuses in teacher unions across the country, particularly in places like Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, and Philadelphia. We learn that NYCoRE is also a part of a national network called Teacher Activists Groups, in addition to being connected to national organizations like the Education for Liberation Network and Red for Ed.

By its nature, the study of architecture invites us to think about built environments and the spaces those places inhabit. Thus, Lily Song’s “Notes from the Anti-Displacement Studio,” though ostensibly focused on architecture courses taught by the author at Northeastern University, enacts and engages with radical spaces both in how the courses were organized as studios and how the professor and her students reached beyond the studio to interact with a community (Roxbury) and a municipality (Boston) struggling with the constraints of capital. This essay addresses the question of how design pedagogy and methods can be reformulated and retooled to support community-led anti-displacement planning and design initiatives. The analysis particularly focuses on the anti-displacement studio, which takes a grounded, relational, and reparative approach to addressing current gaps in design studio education by aligning university-based teaching and learning with community-led decolonizing agendas.

All good teachers care about their students. Radical teachers have a more holistic understanding of what “care” means. In “Unconditional Care Beyond the Carceral Education State: A Call for Abolitionist Departure,” Margaret Goldman writes about her experience working in a space where she could more fully develop the meaning of radical care. Goldman draws from her experiences as a teacher/ethnographer in an alternative high school, called FREE LA (Fighting for the Revolution to Educate and Empower Los Angeles), that serves and was created by system-impacted young people who have been pushed out of, been barred from, or otherwise refused to participate in traditional schooling. Based on this experience, Goldman concludes that the violent genealogies of conditional care are endemic to state schooling, and that the potential for reclaiming old-new genealogies of unconditional care require radically reimagined educational spaces, which engage with the entire ecosystem of these students’ lives—lives shaped by racism, predatory capitalism, and the carceral state.

Though I’ve used the structuring device of dividing the six essays in this issue of *Radical Teacher* between half of

the essays focused on creating radical space within traditional classrooms and the other half focused on spaces outside such classrooms, as good radicals we know that these spaces are interconnected and mutually constitutive, just as we ourselves are shaped by a mixture of outside (structure) and inside (agency). Radical teachers are always trying to break down oppositions, or rather pointing out that they already are breaking down: the personal and the political, the public and the private, inside and outside, teacher and student, town and gown, ... The spaces of radical teaching are always a mixture of these things. We try to shape radically mixed, democratic classrooms that make radical interventions in the world "outside." The essays in this issue show us some of the ways in which radical teachers can make and are making such interventions. It's now up to us to continue the work within capitalist spaces to transform and transcend such spaces.

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