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RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Radical Love in Adult English as a Second Language

by Kate Kuczynski



BIG SCHOOL PICTURE; LITTLE PAPER MURALDATE, 1992 BY GLADYS NILSSON

> Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation.
>
> —Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

On the first day of my beginning English as a Second Language (ESL) course for adults, I taught basic greetings, question words, and love. With instrumental music playing in the background, students made table-tent nametags, decorated with stylized names, flags, and beloved objects and people. On the first day, 26 adult students from around the world. gathered in a community college classroom on the West side of Chicago—where waves of new migrants denied welcome in Texas have found asylum since 2022—and spent the bulk of the class speaking together to share their names and stories.

Throughout the room, low voices hummed the introductory phrases: "What is your name?" and "You are from…" while raised intonation and an up-turned palm invited response. Answers were shared and received with recognition. "Oh, Cameroon, oh," the asker would respond. "I, Sudamérica, Ecuador."

I referred to this as a "party" for my adult students, moving in and out of the standing space, occasionally gesturing a small tornado in front of my torso, meeting fearful students with "Mix, mix! It's a party!" or warmly engaging them in the sharing of our nametags.

"Hi, my name is Kate. I am from the United States. My family is my wife and my dog. I love books. I love my family. I love my job. I am a teacher," I would narrate, smiling and pointing to the crude but colorful drawings on my own name tag. "What is your name?"

As the volume of the room gradually rose from silent glances to full-throated conversation and laughter, our fears of speaking and of each other subsided. I let the party conclude organically, without managing the timing or transition. Some groups continued their conversations out of curiosity, discovery of a shared first language, or a determination to practice the English phrases through labored articulation. Afterward, everyone's eyes were softer, smiles were freer, and shoulders were lower. Some students reclined more in their chairs; others gave two thumbs up: "Good party."

I bookended this activity with gratitude and a brief explanation of the purpose of the activity, with hand gestures accompanying key words and exaggerated slumped exhausted body language to express the concept of difficulty. "Studying. It's difficult. English... is difficult. The United States... is difficult." Vigorous nods, sighs, and sprinkles of laughter indicated recognition. "Life... is difficult! So, we are a community. We are people, together, for each other. Here, we have each other," I gestured broadly to all the people in the room, then clasped my hands together out in front of my body to approximate solidarity, community, togetherness.

Throughout the semester, we would encounter the many ways that the United States indeed is difficult for the students I work with. As the federal occupation known as Operation Midway Blitz was fully and violently underway in our city, many Latinx students let me know they simply were not leaving home to avoid encountering ICE in their neighborhood. Some were only going out to work or do essential errands, and others were even forced to quit their jobs to avoid the risk of arrest. For some, this meant a pause in their enrollment, and for others it meant assuming great risk to come to class. When I would check in with students about their safety and ability to navigate life in the city, most spoke hope along with the fear: "Dios nos cuida."

I don't share this vignette of warm interactions on the first day of class to romanticize multiculturalism or to cast Standard American English as the language of global unity. I have no illusions about the colonial hegemony that those notions serve. That is the contradiction of teaching English to speakers of other languages. Colonization imposes Romance languages on my students who still speak their indigenous languages, like Mam of Central America or Wolof of West Africa. Imperialism creates conditions that prompt migration to cities like Chicago from the Global South. White supremacy demands Standard English fluency to access even the limited self-determination available to people once they are here. Meanwhile, in the classroom, students genuinely want to learn the language, and I have a duty to teach them well.

Here, I offer a window into our classroom to ask: how can the adult ESL classroom become a space to build solidarity and hope against forces of fear, domination, and despair? My speech after the introductory activity could not fully address the contradictions of the moment, so I was left with the simplest terms: "We are people, together, for each other." As the weeks passed by, our relations to one another grew along with our ability to communicate in English, and we held tightly to our weekly learning community.

This school year, there is no shortage of fear and despair to be felt. Like many educators, I worry about the crises and violence that appear to increase into fractal dimensions with each passing day. Black feminist educator and scholar bell hooks theorizes this challenge:

> A profound cynicism is at the core of dominator culture wherever it prevails in the world. At this time in our lives, citizens all around the world feel touched by death-dealing cynicism that normalizes violence, that makes war and tells us that peace is not possible, that it can especially not be realized among those who are different, who do not look or sound alike, who do not eat the same food, worship the same gods, or speak the same language. (2003, p. 11)

The choice of my adult students to learn and survive in the face of this "death-dealing cynicism," then, is a radically hopeful one. To speak a new language in a room full of perfect strangers, to place a degree of trust (however tentatively) in a White teacher like me, to sacrifice their time for the sake of learning as working adults. In the moments when I am feeling un-courageous from my position as an educator—scared to reveal my trans or queer identity or my revolutionary politics—for

fear of the impossibility of peace that bell hooks (2003) attributes to a dominator culture, I can remember to see the courage of the other people in the room and move with love.

As educators, we must do this because practicing courageous love builds solidarity. For hooks, in order to fully embody a love ethic, we need to bravely connect and break through isolation: "Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way" (1999, p. 101). What fears do we need to face in this moment—historically, collectively, personally? When our pedagogy makes room for love in the face of fear, we prepare ourselves for the work of collective transformation. Love changes us at the same time that it fortifies us as unique individuals and in community with each other.

And yet, in the quiet hours, this love ethic can feel woefully insufficient, especially when the U.S. empire wages war at home and abroad. The death-dealing cynicism looms everywhere we look. What if showing up with love isn't enough? How can I teach verb tense when a revolution is long overdue, but it still feels distant on the horizon? Freire speaks to this contradiction:

> But the humanist, revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility [of revolutionary struggle] to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them. (Freire, 2000, p. 75)

As such, a love ethic is foundational to mutual humanization, trust, and solidarity with students. We humanize by witnessing each other in our complexity. We build trust by making sure students find our classrooms places of safety, dignity, and agency. Where a common language cannot yet develop our critical consciousness, a radical ontology can help us make the road towards solidarity. Freire taught us that this is what love does: it helps us in the act of becoming more human (Allman et al., 1998) and it fortifies our spirits for the current and coming struggle. So, let us continue be loving in our praxis: without the power of radical love, there is no revolution.

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