RADICAL TEACHER

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

Preaching to the Choir: Turning Anger Into Engagement at Urban Community Colleges

by Jesse W. Schwartz

STUDENTS AT LAGUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE, PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

In the wake of the last presidential election, and like so many of my fellow educators, I was uncertain what to expect when I entered the classroom the morning after November 8th. And, indeed, the horrific and all-too-believable accounts of students and teachers alike being harassed in school by emboldened bigots of all hate-filled persuasions rapidly started to flood my social media. Personally, I was in an enviable situation when it came to the possibility of threat: As a cis-gendered straight white male with gainful employment, I wasn't exactly a prime target for any of the increased vitriol being unleashed upon the millions of people that didn't inhabit such a socially fortunate combination of identity positions.[1] Professionally, however, my situation was far more complicated even though (once again) I did not feel at risk myself: As an assistant professor of English at LaGuardia Community College, one of twenty-four schools within the City University of New York (CUNY) system, I knew that the overwhelming majority of my students were overdetermined targets for the sexism, homophobia, immigrant-bashing, and race-baiting that had characterized the campaign—while the subsequent policies unleashed by this new administration seemed almost tailor-made to inflict maximum damage to the lives and loved ones of the people in my classroom.

First, some context: CUNY is the largest and most diverse urban university system in the country, and LaGuardia is the most diverse school within that system (our unofficial motto, "The World's Community College," is a rarity in higher ed: a tagline closer to fact than aspiration). As of 2016, our student body of over 19,000 was nearly 60% women, was an astonishing 89% non-white, and spoke over 125 languages. 71% of the entire student body come from families making less than $30K per year, half are Latinx, and an incredible 57% are foreign-born. Needless to say, the [1] pallor afflicting my usually ebullient classes was palpable, and, for nearly two full weeks after the election, I discarded my lesson plans almost entirely—as my students and I discussed more pressing existential concerns, such as what to do for an undocumented family member or where to get legal help for students that no longer felt comfortable (if, indeed, they ever did) about contacting police in the wake of a crime.

After we addressed the most dire problems that had arisen, my classes and I spent much of the rest of that semester attempting to provide historical context to the broad social changes that, for many of my students, had occurred seemingly overnight. We also endeavored to codify what "Trumpism" was (or even if, in fact, such a term could be organized into an even loose collection of monstrously related ideologies). From a campaign season that began with the suddenly real prospect of free community college for all (à la Sanders) and then ended with the Trump administration's Muslim ban, my students expressed the same shock and vertigo I heard about from many of my colleagues—so I was happy to use the classroom as a place where the students could, in part, attempt to process some of their anger, sadness, confusion, and fear.

For the following fall 2017 semester—and while I hesitate to call it a silver lining exactly—I will admit that my students in general (and in most cases by necessity) seemed to arrive in my class more politically conscious than ever before. And the conversations in class seemed to be of the same tenor as the previous term, if perhaps at a slightly less feverish pitch—as many of the Trump Administration's most horrific attempts at racist policies continued to be stayed by the courts. Though I was happy to continue giving my students a space to read about, critically think on, and write about the administration's policies and their rage, I began to experience an increasing dissatisfaction at using the class merely as a pressure valve for their very understandable anxiety and anger. Or, rather, in the midst of such a vulnerable yet conscious population of students that continued to express a sense of powerlessness overall, I wanted help them channel their political concerns into action—as one of the most common questions my students asked during those first few months was: "But what can we *do* about it?" So I decided to take their query seriously, designing an English 101 class wherein all the readings and writing would be oriented around some kind of rights-based activism in order to help them understand what was happening, apprehend the deep and imbricated histories that had brought us to this point, assist them in researching possible opportunities for involvement—and then, most importantly, take part in what they found in whatever ways were both achievable and made sense for their particular political engagements. And, as with so many well-meaning educational designs, it is here that my problems began.

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In short, after a semester and a half of helping my students manage their anger and fear, I developed a syllabus with a component of outside social engagement built in. Obviously, I was not assigning a single political viewpoint, issue, or position, and would certainly not want to dictate where they went and what they did there—so from the very beginning I decided to leave everything but the actual fact of attending some type of event, discussion, action, etc. entirely up to them. My first question, then, was what a syllabus of praxis might look like, and where I might find some examples. Frankly, after some initial online searches, I was somewhat surprised to find so few lesson plans and assignments that asked for real engagement outside the classroom (though perhaps it was my own misunderstanding of the search terms). Certainly,

and since at least the tragedy of Ferguson, plenty of excellent reading lists and lesson plans exist for in-class practice, but otherwise inspired syllabi organized around such topics as Black Lives Matter, Charlottesville, and Beyoncé's "Lemonade" provided outstanding materials but little based outside the boundaries of the classroom. And what few assignments I did find struck me as overwhelmingly conceived for privileged students at small residential colleges—young people usually already imbued with the sense of belonging (not to mention also the time, money, and US citizenship) that would make such outings far easier to accomplish than for my own students. This lack of materials applicable for the people in my classrooms—ironically the very groups that ostensibly had the most to "lose" from the new administration—demanded that I try to create a form of engagement that could be built in with relative ease to any research-based writing component of an introductory-level class at any urban school and for any student body.

My point of departure for the class was the Gramscian contention that "'everyone' is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity."[2] I also advertised my intentions as such: A composition course based on rights-based movements that would hopefully be filled by students at least mildly interested in the topic, and looking to channel their anger, interest, and convictions into action. Luckily, I had a better turnout than expected and the class seemed to be equally divided by thirds: About six students arrived already politically active and engaged, another six were politically curious but had no previous experience with "activism" (broadly conceived), and another six were admittedly just there because the class fit their schedule.

As we discussed the content of the course and expectations of outside engagement—and though I was constantly buoyed by most of my students' desire to protect their families as well as fight back in solidarity with other groups under threat—when we discussed the practical nature of "getting involved," three distinct categories of difficulty, confusion, and resistance emerged: 1. Either the systems and structures they wanted to fight against seemed impossibly vast, powerful, and diffuse or they simply had very little understanding of the organizations and groups that already existed to combat such entities (with emblematic questions like "how do I fight a federal policy?" or "what can I do to stop police violence?"); 2. Students expressed a concern that they wouldn't necessarily feel welcome in more local settings focused on political and social change (they usually viewed such groups in NYC—and, frankly, often with good reason— as what one student called "white spaces"); or 3. In the age of Black Lives Matter— whose public-facing members both inspired and intimidated many of my students with their deep historical knowledge, theoretical sophistication, and uncompromising fervor—they thought all "activism" meant some kind of public protest that often led to

dramatic confrontations with law enforcement (and though many expressed a desire to take part in such actions, they were understandably concerned that such involvement might jeopardize their own lives as well as their families' immigration status). After several valuable conversations with my students around these issues, my first goal was to help dispel some of these misconceptions (and, of course, also agree with a number of their suspicions)—and to also facilitate their understanding that there is a vast space of possible engagement between simply "liking" a friend's political Facebook post and getting tear-gassed by cops.

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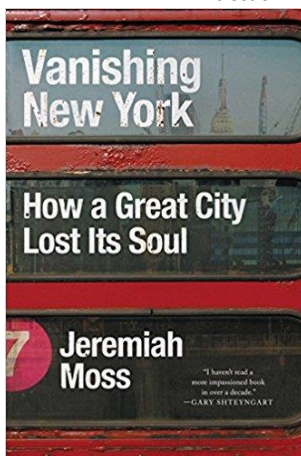
Emerging out of these concerns and contradictions, it seemed important to first come up with a working definition of activism itself that encompassed as many of the various forms of engagement we could think of, which we produced together as a class using an amalgam of the Wikipedia entry and a few online dictionaries: "Activism is simply *any* activity and engagement in the service of social change." With this as our guide, we then made a list on the board of all the possible actions that could fall under such a capacious definition, hoping to demystify what for many was a previously imposing term. Within this characterization, many students immediately recognized that they had already been involved in such activities, like the student who quickly raised her hand and asked, "So when the families on my block all let each other know when ICE is patrolling, that's activism too?" My students, armed with the new definition they had come up with, assured her—much to her delight— that she was already very much an activist.

As a corollary writing assignment to this definition-making, I wanted to help them understand the rubrics of what the humanities and social sciences conceive of as "identity categories" in order for them to articulate their own positionality based on these groupings, and then to analyze how their life experiences may be explained at least in part by how they locate themselves within such formations—not, of course, as a destiny preordained but rather as contours of possibility. To this end, after a brief discussion of the concepts, we listed on the board all the identity categories we could think of (with one particularly prepared student asking, "And what about intersectionality?"—and then eagerly explaining to the class [2] what she meant by that term). I then asked all the students to adopt whichever categories they thought defined them best, and to write down a personal story they thought was only possible due to the categories they chose. As we went around the room sharing our work, the

sadly unsurprising instances of homophobia, transphobia, racism, and sexism by family members, employers, the police, etc. soon emerged. In fact, the only two cis-gendered straight white male students in the class provided accidental and good-natured foils to the previous stories: Both explained a narrative about how their identity categories helped them *avoid* being affected when law enforcement had discovered them using cannabis in a local park and allowed them to leave—only to then detain and arrest their darker-skinned friends.

This centrality of identity categories helped them make more sense of the texts I had mapped out for the class. In fact, the path I'd hoped to take was relatively simple: First to understand themselves and their experiences as in part corralled by systems, institutions, and ideologies that had long preceded them; then to make sense of the loose amalgamation of both spectacular and quotidian horrors alongside the triumphantly cruel venality that comprised the baggy doctrine of Trumpism; next to read case studies around some issues that affected them directly; and finally to engage in some kind of scaffolded research project that comprised at least in part some kind of activity outside the classroom in the service of social change (as they themselves understood the phrase). We soon set about reading any number of the seemingly infinite "think pieces" on Trumpism, its effects, and the histories that engendered it. We also read short pieces from the Black Lives Matter website that characterized the movement in its own words and on its own terms. Added to that were longer-form works such as Ta-Nehisi Coates' sweeping "The Case For Reparations" (also a profound model of insight, analysis, and argumentation for the classes' upcoming research projects). And all of their writing assignments, both long-form and low-stakes, were in some way investigations of these topics. For the broader case study, I chose New York City itself—a cliché (to my mind at least) precisely because it's so fecund. In particular, I thought the topic of gentrification seemed a sadly ideal site to help my students understand how such seemingly abstract concepts as "global finance" could forcefully combine with previously existing legacies of racism, sexism, classism, and other ideologies of exclusion to transform my students' very neighborhoods—and, indeed, often force them and their families to move multiple times in its wake (or, in some cases, to become unhomed entirely)—while also providing a number of possibilities for local engagement. Jeremiah Moss's recent *Vanishing New York* did an excellent job of breaking down complicated topics and terms such as neoliberalism (relying in large part on CUNY's own David Harvey and his greatly missed student, Neil Smith) and explaining how seemingly abstract forces like "global capital" relate directly to NYC real estate and politics—particularly when it comes to such unmistakably imbricated and implicated practices such as food deserts and stop & frisk.

VANISHING NEW YORK: HOW A GREAT CITY LOST ITS SOUL BY JEREMIAH MOSS, DEY STREET BOOKS (2017)

This extensive framing took us about halfway through the semester, and it was then time for them to choose their own topics as well as their sites of outside engagement. Fortunately, we have a pretty politically active campus, so the class and I were able to attend several events organized at LaGuardia to help them dispel some of the anxiety around preparedness and inclusion: A symposium on Black Lives Matter, an event on immigration rights, and a forum on the "right to the city"—all about which my students reported an enormous sense of relief and excitement to see rooms full of young people that looked just like them already engaged in this kind of work. Their final projects would be a combination of the entire semester so far: Their identities as they saw them in the wake of Trump combined with a powerful and specific case study of whatever social issue they wanted to learn more about, which would then also be the subject of—or at least related to—their outside activism. As that extracurricular phase approached, my students once again evinced the anxiety they had expressed on the first day of class about what to do, where to do it, and how they would be received. I tried to counter some of this worry by detailing my own engagements over the years, and how varied the experiences had been—from helping plan direct actions as an undergrad to protesting various causes in the streets over the years to hyperlocal concerns such as forming a "friends" group for my local dog park. Much more effectively than my own recollections, I used some humor to defuse their discomfort, showing the class some short clips from the recent sitcom "Parks & Recreation," wherein the lead characters hold town-hall meetings filled with humorously exaggerated versions of the "types" such gatherings often attract. My students were certain that *actual* meetings couldn't possibly be quite as strange or as focused on seemingly meaningless minutiae. Luckily, my own community board in Brooklyn posts all their own meetings online in full, so I had several of these clips also ready to go. While these events are often only comical in how dry they can be, my students were fascinated as local residents took to the microphones to complain—sometimes in lengthy and heated diatribes—about such seemingly minor concerns as loud feral cats and the style of new garbage cans, but also about more pressing local issues like dangerous construction, the lack of affordable housing, and, in the particular case of North Brooklyn, the recent disastrous handling by a local police precinct of a string of sexual-assault allegations. In a more moderate instance, one local resident began peppering the would-be proprietor of a new bar with demands for noise diminution as well as promises of security to manage the crowds. One student who lived above an apparently raucous establishment in her own neighborhood was excited to see someone publicly demanding from business owners exactly the respect and accountability she wished her downstairs neighbor would offer her own block. My students were also happy to see

that the faces running the [3]meeting looked much like New York itself: An older Black woman sitting next to an Orthodox Jewish man sitting next to a young Latinx woman sitting next to a Southeast Asian man wearing a rainbow flag on his shirt. Perhaps a little unfairly, I also showed a full and monstrously boring ten-minute clip of one local contractor detailing all the safety protocols for large-scale construction after a local zoning change, hoping to mitigate my students' unease with the very real tedium that can at times characterize local involvement.

Obviously, for the typical community-college student, both time and money are at a premium. Nearly all of my students had at least part-time jobs, and in addition either took care of their own children or another family member (and, not that infrequently, both) while also taking a full load of courses to qualify for financial aid. So while I was adamant that they needed to attend at least one outside meeting, event, action, etc., I also wanted to stay mindful of their previous obligations and complicated lives. I decided, and only if absolutely necessary, they could attend one of the politically themed meetings at school in order to save time and travel—and I am happy to say that only one of sixteen students took me up on that offer.

So, to decide what they might do off-campus, I first had them do a freewrite in class on their interests in general, their political positions in particular, and their identity categories, and then look for any kind of theme that might run through all three. For example, one student interested in history and anti-gentrification movements, and who identified as a queer woman, began looking for groups that helped LGBTQIA+ groups find affordable housing. In her searches, she found an organization that helped homeless queer youth find shelter, with an open call for volunteers. As we began researching other organizations that fit their interests (such as Make The Road New York and the Doe Fund), and because concerns around time were such an issue, I had them make a list of at least five possible groups and meeting times they were interested in, and then decide which meeting at what time and location made the most sense for them. I also asked them to do this about a month in advance in order to have plenty of time to organize their schedule around the upcoming event. This light "contract" was then written into the assignment itself (as one of the many staged blog posts related to the final project). Obviously, if any changes needed to be made at a later date, a simple email or talking to me about it after class would be fine. I also had them—as much as was possible—try to organize all their off-campus meetings over the same three-week span so we could spend a little time in each class discussing what they had done and reflecting on how the students might use such experiences in their finished project. The very first report—told in excited terms to her classmates—merely helped beget a virtuous circle, and only two students had to reschedule their meetings due to last-minute conflicts.

After all the meetings had been attended and the projects completed, my students' final requirement was a presentation to the class. And not only were the presentations an exciting way for them to share their work with their peers, but they also cross-pollinated rather quickly: Students not only saw connections between the work of anti-racist groups and affordable-housing organizations, but they also learned from one another about other meetings they might want to attend—and indeed some declared with enthusiasm that they planned to do exactly that. The projects included the gentrification of the East Village (with time spent by the reporting student at the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space), Russia's military and stealth incursions into former territories and spheres of influence (by an immigrant from the Republic of Georgia who attended a meeting at the UN, with access granted by his diplomat father), and state-sanctioned homophobia in Jamaica (by a queer immigrant from that nation's capital who spent her time at a meeting in Queens dedicated to spotlighting the increasing rates of violence suffered by queer women of color). Most surprisingly (and perhaps due in part to their targeted research ahead of time), not a single student expressed any sense of exclusion during their meetings, and several went out of their way to express how warm, welcoming, and grateful a number of organizations were to have them there. In a particularly poignant combination of school and life, one student, who had to miss two weeks of class in order for her whole family to fly to Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria to locate one of her aunts, attended an organizational meeting in Brooklyn focused on outreach to that island—and she has since remained deeply involved. Indeed, that was not an unlikely result: One of my students is now a member of Students for Justice in Palestine at Hunter College, where he plans to transfer next year, and another student is still involved in homeless outreach in her neighborhood of Woodhaven, Queens. In fact, I was frankly a bit shocked at how excited my students declared themselves to be to remain engaged with their work outside the school (and, by way of anecdotal run-ins with several of them in the halls, they remain so).

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In short, and most immediately, an assignment that asks for this kind of engagement seems to help them understand that multiple networks already exist to combat exactly the kinds of policies and ideologies they had already expressed such understandable concern about while also helping dispel some of the misconceptions they had about engagement in the first place. And, after several conversations with other interested faculty, I would think that most urban community colleges provide a similarly ideal site through which to demystify and thereby increase the level of local engagement for a population of students—

at least in my experience—eager to get involved. In terms of grading, I found it relatively easy to separate my own obvious delight with their out-of-class events from the more nuts-and-bolts needs of an English composition class. I assessed students' final projects holistically as I usually do: Attempting to gauge their ability to synthesize vast and various materials into a coherent argument (after all, this was still 101), but also through their ability to integrate the materials we covered in class into a coherent argumentative whole. Of course, I didn't grade them on their activistic enthusiasm, but I did see a strong and perhaps unsurprising link between their efforts in class and their efforts outside.

Most importantly (for myself as an educator, at least), this approach confirmed a hunch I had about the apathy supposedly afflicting that oft-maligned group, so general as to be nearly imaginary: "college students today." Rather than prodding or prompting, most of my own students simply needed a light introduction to the possibilities for action—and then for me to get out of the way. What's more, while I have great latitude as to the thematic focus for ENG101, I could easily see myself building similar assignments into any of my literature classes that have political components, especially "ethnic" and immigrant American literatures. But composition does seem like an ideal site to engage most students right as they arrive—so, ideally, I would teach this class again in a similar fashion, swapping out certain readings for more current ones (indeed, this semester I've included a piece about and a few videos of the Parkland activists, particularly Emma Gonzalez, the queer Latinx woman from Florida, who has offered my students so much in the way of both identity politics and a model of youthful political engagement). I'm also mindful of the potential difficulties of using such an approach in other locations: I teach in an area rather hostile to the current administration (on average, districts in Brooklyn and Queens voted for Clinton by about 80-93%), and I also have a very supportive and outspoken set of administrators at LaGuardia, so I might suggest to other educators in less favorable climes to focus as much as possible on the engagement itself rather than any particular political position or desire. And whatever pedagogical challenges that remain are not specific to this class but are familiar to anyone teaching first-year students at community colleges: A lack of preparation, complicated personal situations, and the ever-present exigencies of poverty. None of this, of course, minimizes my desire to teach this way again, and my goal would be to use such assignments until there's no longer any need to—though, to paraphrase the old Soviet joke, such titanic social transformation appears always to be "just" over the horizon. However, even without any idealistic fantasies, at the very least this course helped my students understand that such outside engagement was not only possible but, in an urban area, relatively easy to find—and often even enjoyable. Or, as one of my students poignantly said during his presentation: "Going to this meeting and hearing what they were doing was the first time I didn't feel hopeless since the election. It was the first time I actually believed Kendrick when he said, 'We gon' be alright'—and now I was one of the people helping to get us there."

Notes

1 I'm Jewish—but, as a secular Jew living in New York City, I feel (perhaps naively) insulated from much of the brunt of the recent rise of anti-Semitism.

2 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 2005) 330-331.