

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Teaching the Ordinary: What's in a Chair

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.89, 2010)

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IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

While working in teacher education at an inner city university in New York, I implemented a method that used daily life experiences of the ordinary in a subversive way. On a typical afternoon, some students would arrive directly from their teaching internships and sit around the classroom excitedly trading stories of their classroom experiences. Other students would shuffle in with large cups of coffee, taking seats in the back, clearly exhausted from the day's work, and not appearing energized for a three-hour session on "Teaching Methods in Secondary Social Studies." Most students were already acclimated to the schooling routine, donning the "been there, done that" kind of survival attitude that many teachers wear as a form of passive resistance, not exactly the best audience with which to begin lectures on teaching methods, the finer points of constructivist theory versus behaviorism, the latest lesson plan format, new strategies for exam preparation, or whatever else the methods textbook offered.

Many professors might begin a session by calling the class to order and proceeding with the topic of the day. I had been thinking about the absence of the ordinary in academic discourse, and found inspiration in re-reading Ira Shor's *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, particularly the chapter in which he deconstructs a hamburger. Looking for a change of pace, I struck upon an idea. As the class of about thirty students chattered on and the clock ticked twenty minutes past the designated start time, I picked up one of those plastic and tube metal institutional seats with a pressboard side desk and slammed it down hard on top of the teacher's desk (itself made of heavy industrial steel). This made a very loud booming noise that echoed around the concrete walls of the classroom, and the students were stunned, immediately turning toward me, transfixed for a moment in utter silence.

With most students probably expecting to be scolded for talking too much, perhaps already thinking up snappy comebacks, I caught the class off guard by asking, without missing a beat, "What's this?" There were looks of confusion. I pointed at the chair, and asked again, "Come on, what's this?" After deciding some clever game was in progress, one student retorted, "It's a work of art!" I said, "Really? Does anyone else see a work of art?" Some laughed, most looked puzzled, and it took a while for the class to realize that there was no trick question. I really wanted them to tell me what it was: a chair.

Finally, someone "got it" and, following Shor, I proceeded to describe how an ordinary object contained within it an array of social and political relations, teaching them a method by enacting it, deconstructing the chair, what it was made of, turning it over and examining it for clues as to where it was made and who assembled it and brought it to market. After a while, I expanded the

discussion by tracing chairs as signifiers of gender and class relations, from student chairs to teacher chairs (Why were they different? What did that mean?), to thrones and pews and even no chairs, systematically unpacking the meanings of what most took for granted as a part of daily life.

Some students resisted, perhaps holding to the belief that this was not "knowledge." But the class was savvy enough that they could respond to each other and I could concentrate on revealing the social matrix embedded in that one chair, its political economy, but also the way in which it normalized the human experiences of teaching and learning. To achieve the latter, I asked someone to demonstrate the right way -- and the wrong way -- to use this object called a chair, which I had hoped would lead us on to observations about uniformity, conformity, and the politics of the body in school classrooms.

Then something unexpected happened. A female student was demonstrating the "wrong way" to sit in a school chair, slouching down in the seat, resting her legs on the table part, and taking notes in a notebook resting on her lap. "Why do you sit that way?" I asked, and she said, "The correct way is really not comfortable for me." This young woman was full figured and short, and so I asked, "Are you uncomfortable because of your body shape?" I knew I was going out on a limb with such a question, as another student quickly jumped in: "Hey now, Proglar, that's discrimination!" I said, "Perhaps, but is it not possible that the chair is discriminating, not me?" Everyone laughed in disbelief. One asked, "How can this inanimate object discriminate?" Another insisted, "Only people discriminate; this is an ordinary object." "But if we just showed that a whole array of people and social relations are involved in bringing this chair into the classroom," I asked, "then do you mean to say that it was not possible that they may have built some of those relations into this chair?" There was silence.

The student sitting "incorrectly" in the chair agreed with me, and others began to talk about not being able to find a left-handed desk, and eventually we had a meaningful discussion about how social relations get embedded in objects. It was a truly teachable moment, and even the cynical students thanked me. I continued to develop methods that focused on revealing the social relations and politics of the ordinary, although I was breaking the institutional rules by so doing. However, while some students seemed resistant -- asking "Where's the textbook?" -- many came to accept what I was trying to do. Eventually, I sent students out to fast food restaurants, shopping malls, museums, and other sites of cultural pedagogy, helping them to grasp ordinary life as a teaching tool.



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