

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Introduction

by Bob Rosen

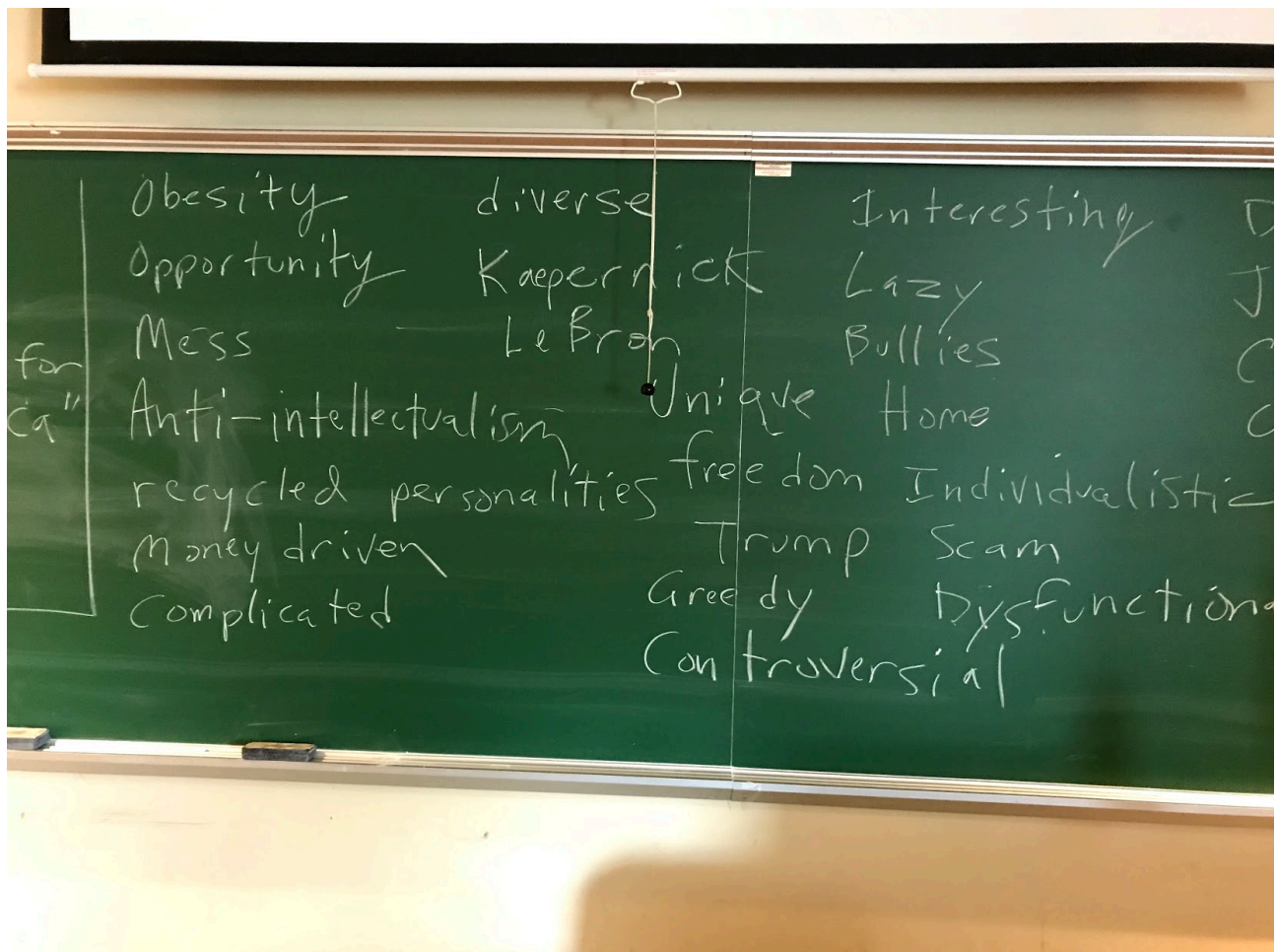


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Among all the other retrospections that the present era has forced on us, the editors of *Radical Teacher* thought we ought to include questions about how the topics and approaches of radical teaching have changed over the years. What can four decades of classroom experiments in confronting societal inequalities teach us now? We decided to look at this question through the lens of the journal's Teaching Notes column, which began in issue number 11, back in 1979, when many of us were much younger. The editors decided at the time that it would be helpful to provide a place where contributors could write a brief description of a single book, film, poem, story, or other work that they thought our readers might find useful in their teaching. An outgrowth of the strong (though not exclusively) practical orientation of *Radical Teacher*, the column, we hoped, would spread the word about valuable materials and help busy radical teachers pursue their goals in the classroom

Almost four decades later, as many of us on the editorial board were waxing retrospective (and at least two of us were writing memoirs), we decided to reprint a sampling of past Teaching Notes. Six of us – Pam Annas, Jackie Brady, Paul Lauter, Frinde Maher, Bob Rosen, and Leonard Vogt – waded through over 300 Notes and cast several rounds of votes. In making our selections, we looked for Notes that were intrinsically interesting and, hopefully, still of use. We at first considered excluding Teaching Notes based on books that are now out of print but finally decided that just about everything is available somehow – whether from online used booksellers or Xerox machines or postings on Blackboard or downloadable pdf files. And we felt that even a good Teaching Note on a work truly unavailable, if provocative enough, could stimulate thinking about how to teach something else.

Our somewhat messy process kicked up the forty-seven Teaching Notes collected here. A few -- Jack Weston's rather dated 1984 Note on teaching "He Defies You Still: The Memoirs of a Sissy," for example -- we included because they helped mark an expansion of what *Radical Teacher* and many radical teachers were focusing on, in this case, homophobia in the classroom and elsewhere. And others we included simply because they were fun. Over all, we believe these selections provide a good picture of what the column has been and, we hope, of what has and hasn't changed for radical teachers over the years. This may not be "big data," but there are some patterns and trends worth noticing.

The early Teaching Notes largely reflect the journal's 1975 origin in the Radical Caucus of the Modern Language Association and its founding by literature professors.¹ Excitement ran high then for revising the literary canon, toppling its dominance by white male writers, uncovering lost works, bringing deserved attention to women writers, Black writers, and others traditionally marginalized. (The Feminist Press had been founded in 1970; Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press would arrive soon, in 1980.) Debby Rosenfelt's Teaching Note on a story collection by Alice Walker, as well as Pam Annas and Suzy Groden's Note on Ann Petry's novel *The Street*, are examples of early

contributions included here. It was a time when many teachers felt that teaching the right book could awaken the sleeping radical in students too long exposed to mainstream, canonical books, books terribly limited in their perspectives on race, gender, class, sexuality.

Over time, the approach to literary works featured in Teaching Notes grew more complex, as in Joseph Entin's Note on Anzia Yezerska's *Bread Givers*, and teaching itself became more complicated, as analyzed, for example, in Onita Estes-Hicks's "Teaching *Native Son* to Native Daughters." And what once might have seemed a very straightforward thing to do – teaching, for example, about the brutal history of slavery in a history course – revealed itself to be double-edged in Robyn C. Spencer's Note, "Mad at History."

As the backlash against the progress of the 1960s gained ground, and as Teaching Notes got longer (due to lax enforcement of the original word limit), contributors increasingly began writing not only about what to teach but also about how to teach. Much of this new emphasis on pedagogy started in Notes about teaching writing, not surprising given the English-centric nature of the *Radical Teacher* board (something we are always striving to change but rarely getting very far with) as well as growth in the field of composition pedagogy. This new emphasis also reflected the rapidly expanding trend, frequently analyzed in *Radical Teacher*, of hiring PhD's in English to teach Composition as adjuncts, which sometimes led them towards the left. We get an early glimpse of much of this in Buzz Alexander's 1982 Note on using Ira Shor's book, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, in a course for future community college teachers. And, later, we see a detailed discussion of pedagogy in Scott Oldenburg's "Grammar in the Student-Centered Composition Class" as well as in Shor's own Note, "Can Critical Teaching Foster Activism in This Time of Repression." And, in fact, writing courses, especially first-year writing courses, became a frequent site for all kinds of explorations: cultural criticism for Michael Bennett in "Teaching with *Writing About Media*"; anti-racist protests by Olympic athletes in a "compare/contrast" paper assignment for Lisa Verner; "race, class, ethnicity. . . sex" for Andrew Tonkovich in his Note on teaching Bing Crosby's and Otis Redding's renditions of "White Christmas."

Pedagogy is increasingly a concern in Teaching Notes about other kinds of courses as well. Mark Graham, for example, requires his students to create a wiki displaying their research into global commodity chains in a human geography course; Veronica Gaylie assigns future middle school teachers to develop a campus action in response to a film about war; Nathaniel W. Smith begins by asking students to guess the "race" of people in photos Frederick Douglass had used to show "the arbitrariness of race"; Linda S. Watts asks students to create works of art in a literary theory course; Vicki Reitenauer, as she describes in a long and detailed Note, implements a challenging program of "self-grading" in a gender studies course.

Some of the most stimulating Teaching Notes, usually more recent ones, are rooted not in success in the classroom but in stumbling, missed opportunity, mixed results, or simply failure. In "Reflections of a Transgender Medievalist," Angelique Davi describes being accosted by a stranger for her "gender-bending" identity while on a trip to London with a group of students and regrets letting a valuable teaching moment slip by. In "Ask More Questions?" Allison Rickett wishes she hadn't pushed her politics so hard, for she ends up diverting a promising student project down a reactionary path. And Mychel Estevez, in "Dear Solitary Black Student," contemplates the still unmet challenge of teaching his largely white class about racism without placing an unwanted burden on students of color.

In 1977, *Radical Teacher* published its first issue (issue number 6) entirely devoted to teaching women's studies, and feminist pedagogy and teaching about sexism have been central concerns of the journal ever since. Early Teaching Notes, such as Saul Slapikoff's on using Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Myths of Gender* in a biology course, focus on exposing students to the fact of sexism. Similarly, Philip Frisk writes about teaching "Barbie Doll," a poem in which Marge Piercy hammers home the impact of a sexist culture. Later Notes, such as Anna Kurian's "Teaching *Titus Andronicus* in Contemporary India" and Erin Hurt's "Deconstructing 'Real' Love in the Classroom," about a course on "chick lit," complicate things by pressing students to become resisting readers. And Perin Gurel, in "Transnational Feminism, Islam, and the Other Woman: How to Teach," challenges feminist teachers to look at their own biases, at the ways they themselves have been socialized.

Over one fifth of the Teaching Notes reprinted here involve LGBTQ issues, not surprising since *Radical Teacher* addressed these issues early and often. And as the struggle for what was called "gay liberation" evolved, the Teaching Notes did as well. Early Notes, such as Cathy Hoffman and Diane Raymond's on the film *Pink Triangles* or Jack Weston's on "Memoirs of a Sissy," emphasize the importance of exposing students to the oppression of gay men and lesbians. Later Notes, reflecting later movement activism, bring in transgender issues: Daniel Farr writes of "Problematizing Sex/Gender with Transgender Marriage Law" and two Notes published together, by Alexandra Barron and by Charles Nero, focus on teaching the film *Boys Don't Cry*. The second of the two, "Boyz Do Cry: Screening History's White Lies," complicates the issue of transphobia with questions of race, as of course happened in LGBTQ movements themselves.

Race/ethnicity has been a consistent focus of *Radical Teacher*, and this too has been reflected in its Teaching Notes. In an early one, Susan Radner recommends the still very valuable 1987 film *Ethnic Notions*, which traces the changing ideological work done by stereotypes of African Americans during the slavery and Jim Crow eras. George Mariscal describes the ways short stories by Dagoberto Gilb push students "to consider class, gender, and ethnicity together" in a course on Chicano literature. Julie Bolt sees Sherman Alexie's collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* as a "great tool for complicating the issue of identity." Richard Hughes asks history students to look back at a 1938

Federal Housing Authority Underwriting Manual to discover the ways the US government helped create "a racialized version of the American Dream." And librarian Angela Pashia conducts an information literacy lesson that asks students to analyze tweets and news reports surrounding the 2014 uprising against police violence in Ferguson, Missouri.

Issues of class and class consciousness inform many of the Teaching Notes included here, but are perhaps best dramatized in James Thompson's Note on leading his literature students from a discussion of the safely distant class hierarchy of 18th Century England to a more clear-eyed view of class and exploitation in their own world. Other Notes take on other issues: Sanford Radner uses Graham Green's *The Quiet American* to teach about imperialism; Margaret Cruikshank uses herself as Exhibit A in teaching "Feminist Gerontology" in her women's studies course; Navyug Gill asks history students to compare the political spectrum they see in today's public discourse to that of 19th Century Europe in "Overcoming Being Overwhelmed in the Trump Era."

This introduction only touches on the rich collection here. We hope you'll find inspiration in some of these Teaching Notes and, better yet, consider submitting one of your own.²

Notes

¹ For a good overview of the history of *Radical Teacher*, see the introduction by Michael Bennett, Linda Dittmar, and Paul Lauter to issue 100.

² Serendipitously, the poems accompanying this issue function as a Teaching Note grounded in a collective creative writing exercise on two topics: violence against women, and birth practices and reproductive justice. Do check them out.