

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Radical Teaching Then & Now

by Sarah Chinn



TEACHING SUPPORT STAFF UNION LOGO. WIKIMEDIA 2012

What is radical teaching? Is it teaching radical content: undiscovered histories, underrepresented authors, language instruction with a decolonial bent? Or is it pedagogical method, countering the hierarchy of the classroom, letting students teach and teachers learn, taking responsibility for the power of the instructor? Or is it resisting the larger structures of control that mandate standardized testing, remove fiction and poetry from required reading because they are too "subjective," and remove "difficult" children from charter schools so they don't drag down test scores?

Of course, it's all these things. Indeed, it's hard to engage in radical teaching without engaging both the micro and the macro structures in both K-12 and higher education. After all, as Christopher Newfield argues in *The Great Mistake*, it's hard to separate the disinvestment in public higher education from the increased focus on pre-professional programs in colleges and universities or from the reduced expectations of student intellectual work that those programs demonstrate. Moreover, the forces of neoliberal corporatization and free market evangelism see the whole picture, recognizing that a student who doesn't have access to real intellectual challenges and meaningful ambiguity, a student who is focused on drills and school uniforms and "no excuses" schooling will be less likely to rebel, especially if they've been told that their entire academic future depends upon conceding power.

Radical teaching is both simple and complicated. It requires trusting our students and questioning ourselves, acknowledging the complexities of identity and power while remaining clear-headed about the mandate to work out of a commitment to justice and equity. For those of us who work in state-funded institutions, both K-12 and in higher education, it often means working with minimal resources and maintaining morale in a space that might lack air conditioning in the summer, chalk or markers, or even intact walls and ceilings. For those in more elite institutions, it requires teachers not to be seduced by their privileges, and to recognize the difference between what one gets by privilege and what one should get by right.

The landscape of radical teaching and the forces that disrupt this landscape have been in formation for a long time. This issue of *Radical Teacher* begins with a "mini-cluster" of articles adapted from talks that made up a Modern Language Association Convention panel on a crucial moment when these conflicting forces erupted dramatically: 1968, the year of the formation of the MLA Radical Caucus. As Paul Lauter describes it, that MLA was a ferment of radical activity: members called for the creation of a commission on the status of women, demanded that the MLA fund the publication of "lost" texts by women and people of color, put up anti-war posters (quoting William Blake, no less), and successfully nominated Louis Kampf (also a *Radical Teacher* founding board member) to second vice president of the organization, which meant his becoming president two years later.

For Lauter, 1968 was the beginning of many victories, both within the MLA and in the larger scholarly world. Certainly, we are living with its legacy now, especially in terms of the much stronger representation of marginalized

people in the academy and in our anthologies and textbooks. Frederick Douglass and Emily Dickinson, to name just two figures from my own field of 19th century U.S. literature, are now recognized as the literary lions they are, rather than historical footnotes or minor players. And, as Ellen Schrecker points out in her article here, "The Disciplines and the Left: The Radical Caucus Movement," the 1960s were a turning point across the disciplines. For example, the Socialist Scholar's Conference, which was founded in 1965, grew enormously and by 1968 was attracting thousands of participants. Within individual disciplinary annual meetings, radical caucuses formed, calling for change both within their fields and in the larger world. Most successful were demands by radical groups that their professional organizations not schedule future meetings in Chicago, the site of violent assaults on anti-war protestors during the 1968 Democratic Convention there. From the MLA to professional societies in sociology, political science, and history, radical candidates ran for delegate assemblies and officer positions, with some success.

Perhaps the most lasting results of this activism have been in curricula, hiring, and publishing. Across the disciplines, radicals pushed for greater representation of women and people of color (and, later, LGBT people) both in the professoriate and in syllabi. While these fights are far from over, it would be hard to argue that today's classrooms look much like their pre-1968 counterparts. And journals that were founded in the wake of radical organizing – *Radical History Review*, *Crime and Social Justice*, and *Radical Teacher*, to name just a few – are still thriving, in print and/or online. For better or for worse, as Schrecker points out, it is now possible "to pursue a completely conventional career as a professional academic even while doing work in such formerly controversial fields as Women Studies," even as we face the growing corporatization of higher education.

And the past is deeper than just 1968, as Frances Smith Foster shows us. As an academic invested in Sankofa – a belief that one must "go back and retrieve from the past that which is useful for surviving in the present and founding a better future" – Smith Foster takes the long view. After all, there were few women or men of color at the 1968 MLA convention, and those who were there grappled with the overt, unspoken, and internalized racism of other participants, both white and black. Foster's first encounter with the MLA ten years later was mostly more of the same, as it had been since 1884, when its first black member, Dr. William Sanders Scarborough, joined. While there were more sessions on literature by people of color in 1978, the halls were still comparatively bare of non-white members, and few white scholars showed up at panels on multicultural literatures.

As Foster reminds us, the past is instruction for the present. Indeed, she quotes from a 1902 *PMLA* article that while it congratulates the MLA for its achievements, reminds its members that its accomplishments are "the merest symbol of what remains to be done." What happens, though, when the past is valued above the present? That is the conundrum I face in my own article "Moving Without the Movement," which looks at the student activism of twenty years after 1968, during my own college years. In the 1980s, it was a truism that radicalism had abandoned the

academy, and students were interested only in personal achievements and monetary success. That is, the 1980s were for radicals “an ideological wasteland.” I argue, however, that the 1980s were a time of political ferment on the left, but that they were made up of individual, albeit interlocking, movements, rather than the overarching “Movement” that characterized the late 1960s.

Activists of the 1980s didn’t expect a revolution, let alone The Revolution. We worked in smaller orbits, on specific goals. In the essay, I trace two movements in which I was intimately involved: anti-apartheid in South Africa and lesbian feminism. Both were, thankfully, free of the kinds of sectarian struggles that had faced the New Left. And both were informed by a knowledge that the work was about solidarity and process: we knew better than to expect immediate results, and we understood the law of unintended consequences.

As too does Dick Ohmann, the author of the final essay in this mini-cluster, and the one with the longest view in terms of life experience. Given the massive changes we have witnessed between pre- and post-1968, one might expect Ohmann to be celebratory, triumphant even. But that would be too easy and convenient, and Ohmann wants us to face some hard truths. For example, along with the diversification of academia came disinvestment in higher education and the collapse of the academic job market. It’s hardly a coincidence that as academic institutions began to take seriously their obligation to include and represent marginalized communities, state and federal governments decided to get out of the business of funding higher education.

At the same time, the shift towards adjunctification began, picking up serious speed in the 1990s and 2000s. As Ohmann points out, despite the rapid and significant growth in college enrollments, MLA membership – which one could see as a rough estimate for full-time employment in language and literary studies – has shrunk by 23%. And the language of the free market, repackaged and remarketed as neoliberal “disruption” and “innovation,” as Catterall and her co-authors chronicle, has suffused academia. Recent *Radical Teacher* issues on the corporate university and critical university studies have tracked these changes, which seem increasingly irreversible. And academia is hardly alone: as Ohmann argues, we should “be reminded that the degradation of labor and the decline of worker self-organization have been deep trends in capitalism for almost fifty years—that is, for most of the time since World War II.” We radicals may have won the small war of representation, but the neoliberals and neoconservatives won the big war of control of the means of production. In many ways, Ohmann implies that the political battles of the 1960s and the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s were just a smokescreen for a larger ideological fight, one that the left lost, around free market economics and the victory of the 1%.

I’m not so sure (and I say this with great respect for Dick Ohmann’s long memory and great political acumen). It’s true that the present is fairly grim, but there are moments that might give us some hope. The victories of left-leaning, if not outright socialist, candidates, many of them women of color, in the 2018 midterm elections is a bright

spot. The passionate advocacy by youth in the US for gun control and against climate change speaks to the investment young people have in making a safer, cleaner, more sustainable world. While I’m not thrilled with the shameless cashing in of corporate American on the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the lives of queer people in the United States are at the very least more visible, more legible than ever before.

We’re in a strange moment as educators today. Phenomena that didn’t exist when most of us were students—such as Wikipedia, Google, Facebook—now feel essential (how did we live without them!). The mechanisms of neoliberalism that felt so surprising when we first encountered them – more concrete processes like assessment and productivity reporting, as well as the more abstract concepts of disruption, innovation, interdisciplinarity, and the like – have entered our vocabularies or changed meaning by stealth. I know I’ve often had a sort of uncanny feeling of alienation and recognition at meetings with my dean, wondering if he means the same thing as I hear him saying, so slippery are some of these ideas.

But these are abstractions, of course. What’s most interesting is how radical teaching is being practiced on the ground, in schools, colleges, and universities. The articles in this issue of *Radical Teacher* do just that. Their authors are well aware of the strictures placed upon them, both by the institutions in which they teach and in the larger world. They are also aware of how a radical message can easily be declawed, how, as G.T. Reyes shows us, a call for radical, decolonized love can swiftly be reduced to pleas for “tolerance” and “acceptance.”

Several of the articles in this issue engage directly with contemporary phenomena that suffuse today’s educational scene. Going into the belly of the beast, so to speak, Angela L. Pratesi, Wendy Miller, and Elizabeth Sutton describe a project they designed together to have students edit and/or create Wikipedia entries on underrepresented artists and art educators as well as on Haitian artists. Their classes were especially useful in showing students that what shows up in Wikipedia is not simply a neutral reflection of all the knowledge to be had in the world, but rather a collection of information that its editors valued and thought others should know.

By bringing a feminist pedagogy to Wikipedia, Pratesi, Miller, and Sutton helped their students understand that absence from Wikipedia or a lack of sources more generally mirrors the priorities of the dominant culture, in which there is minimal interest in knowing about black artists or feminist art educators. Indeed, not finding enough information for a person or topic is a lesson in itself – of how women are under-cited and research has yet to be done. This exercise also put control in the hands of students. Rather than looking to Wikipedia for information, they learned not only about what qualifies as a reliable source but also to produce knowledge and develop expertise in both technology and content.

On a more administrative level, Kate Catterall, Julia Mickenberg, and Richard Reddick describe their experiences

working on a university-wide initiative on “faculty innovation” at the University of Texas, Austin. They hoped to show how ideas like “design thinking” and “innovation” which “are often associated with the neoliberal restructuring of higher education...might be harnessed by faculty and students to promote positive change in the university.”

As one might imagine, this effort had mixed results. On the one hand, they had comparatively free rein to come up with activities and initiatives, some of which were generously funded. On the other hand, they found themselves enmeshed in the usual issues of gendered and raced workload (the authors are two white women and an African American man), curriculum, and the structure of the neoliberal university, as well as the inevitable shifts in administrative personnel. As they point out, faculty and students might be encouraged to take risks, but too often we pay the price if those risks don't pay out the way funders or administrators would like. They ended up creating events for a phantom “Center for Faculty Innovation,” that was never established, and all three look back on the experience with considerable ambivalence.

Ambivalence also characterizes Arlene Keizer's short but powerful piece, “Collateral Survivorship.” One of the more welcome phenomena of recent years has been the more open conversation about the effects of rape culture and sexualized abuse of power in schools and the workplace (and when those two are the same thing). A full account of sexual harassment and assault in schools, colleges, and universities surely has yet to be made, and Keizer's article gets us part of the way. She describes her (nonsexual) relationship with a colleague, “Bill K.,” who, she later learned, had sexually harassed and abused students at a New England boarding school some years earlier. He was, in the words of the article from which she learned this, a “skilled predator” of young women, which leads her to re-examine her own relationship with him and how the unspoken rules of gendered power played themselves out in their friendship. She sees herself as a “collateral survivor,” someone who cannot help but be suffused by the constraints of male sexual power even though she was never directly victimized.

It's hard to know how to disrupt these power relations, which seem so ever-present and yet so often invisible. G.T. Reyes gives us a clue with what he calls a “pedagogy of disruption and healing.” In response to racist vandalism of the door of the office he shares with an African American colleague, in which antiracist posters and his nameplate were “crossed out” by scrawled x-es, and his colleague's name plate was turned backwards as though to erase her name, Reyes comes up with a creative and dramatic strategy.

Reyes created “Cross Out Quilts,” grids of squares, on each of which was written either a structure of oppression (white supremacy, toxic masculinity) or mechanism of radical repair (self-determination and revolutionary love, for example). In the quilts, the oppressive terms were “crossed out,” and the radical solutions foregrounded, visualizing and literalizing how a radical politics could neutralize hatred and destruction.

While Reyes found little opposition to the quilt, he did have to face a different problem. As the image of the “Cross Out Quilts” were adopted by other institutions, occasionally the radical messages were watered down, so that, for example, “decolonized love” became just “love” or “tolerance” and “acceptance.” Reyes saw challenging this misappropriation as a way to intervene supportively and emphasize the difference between the two seemingly similar messages. Equally importantly, “what I did not recognize at the time was that the creation and installation of Cross This Out had also cultivated collective hope,” as students, faculty, and staff found a vehicle to not just respond to hate speech but also generate new ways of imagining themselves in the world.

The children Nadine Bryce describes in her article on a fourth grade class project (of which her own son was a member) certainly gives us hope. As a “boundary crosser” between parent and researcher, Bryce reports back her own pleasure at seeing inventive teachers integrate radical content into a curriculum required to maintain state standards of literacy, public speaking, and analysis. Together they studied a variety of social movements for justice and then had the students present on an element of those movements that particularly interested them. Rather than a cudgel with which to pummel children into compliance, teachers used literacy instruction that “enabled and promoted sociopolitical consciousness and community engagement.”

Bryce's article gives us one way in which teachers, faced with state mandates, use creative methods to help students succeed academically while “dar[ing] to teach literacy as a matter of justice for all.” The 4th grade teachers worked together to combine writing, reading, social studies, and public speaking and at the same time empowered the children to tell the stories of movements and activists they admired and that spoke to them.

It's also meaningful that two of the essays in this issue are co-written by three authors. They authentically disrupt the status quo of the single-author article that “counts” for tenure and/or promotion, recognizing that knowledge is most often produced collectively. And several of the articles here are about the collaborative work of groups of students or instructors. They provide guideposts to both theorizing and practicing radical teaching.

The dialogue between the mini-cluster on 1968 and the articles about contemporary radical teaching reminds us that the past must be usable even if we can't agree on how to use it. Perhaps we can hold both Lauter's optimism and Ohmann's realpolitik in our minds at the same time, just as Nadine Bryce's fourth grade teachers maintained a balance between radical pedagogy and state academic standards for their students. As G.T. Reyes reminds us, there must be room for collective hope, for the ability, even if only symbolically, to “cross out” structures of repression, oppression, and suppression.

For if radical change is to be made, it must be made collectively. If radical historians showed us anything, it was that the “great man” version of history was only a small part of how things changed, for better and for worse. Radical

economists look not only at corporations but also at co-operatives for models of functioning businesses, and have coined the term "solidarity economy" to name all those economic structures that operate outside the profit motive.

"Collective hope" may not sound as sexy or immediate as "disruption" or "innovation," but it has proven to be far more enduring and, perhaps in the long run, more generative. Or, at least, let's hope so.



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