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ONE TEACHER'S PATH TO PROGRESSIVE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract:
This article is a narrative of one educator's reflections on her journey toward becoming a "progressive pedagogue." The author believes that progressive pedagogy requires the complete equalization of power between teachers and students in the classroom, which is often hindered by historical constructs built into the public education system and the unconscious recesses of the middle class mind. The author identifies three historically constructed "myths" of American education and uses these myths as a lens for her reflections on her teaching practice and beliefs.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

Five heads nodded vigorously, silently. Black ponytails shook, shoulders slumped, and hooded sweatshirts creased around the collars. We were having class in the teachers' lounge, where the air smelled like coffee and Lysol.

"You don't want a rubric?"

They shook their heads. Their ponytails swayed from side to side.

"You don't want any guidelines?"

"That's what they all say." The principal entered the room and swaggered over to the coffee machine. She poured milk into her mug and sucked her teeth. "They all say they don't want you to tell them what to do. Then they come crying to you for structure. They want it both ways." She left the room grumbling.

"Fine," I exhaled when she was out of earshot. "Your final project can be whatever you want. No requirements. No rules. Just write something."

Although I have long realized that my personal academic and economic success is a result of a family history of effectively fulfilling middle class, hegemonic expectations, I never thought critically about the effect such conformity had on the way I approached teaching. In fact, I became an educator because, like hooks (1994), I saw teaching as the ultimate "counter-hegemonic" act and the most direct way to create social change (p. 4). Perhaps because I was successful as a person of color with immigrant roots, I never thought of hegemony in terms of race. Rather, I thought being a counter-hegemonic educator meant fostering learning that would help low-income students overcome the oppression of the middle class.

As a result of my dedication to this goal, I spent hours researching the beliefs of thinkers like hooks (1994) and Freire (1972), both of whom advocate the use of progressive pedagogy, a practice that dispenses with the teacher-as-single-authority model in the classroom. They claim that such a re-adjustment of authority is essential for teaching for social justice, a method I define as the practice of providing students with the skills, determination, and confidence to create social change. By equally privileging every voice, progressive pedagogues suggest that all students have the power and prerogative to contribute to conversations about hegemony and oppression. Furthermore, equalizing power has the potential to eradicate silences by validating experiences of oppression that might otherwise be dismissed because of the lack of authority attached to voices expressing this discontent (Fine & Weiss, 2003). At the time of the incident above, I was convinced I had embedded the principles of progressive pedagogy in everything from my lesson planning to my classroom management to my rapport with my students. Although this may have been partially true, my obsession with learning about liberal ideology blinded me to the fact that participation in middle class culture had resulted in my internalization of components of the system I was trying to challenge, components that will be further described below. Because of my background as the daughter of highly-educated and relatively wealthy first generation South Asian immigrant parents, I equate middle-class ideology with the discipline and behavior I saw in the suburban public school system and elite college that formed my educational history. Specifically, I think of this ideology in terms of socioeconomic status and race. To me, American middle-class values espouse ways of behaving and thinking that reflect the puritanical roots of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers. In a classroom, these values are reinforced when behaviors like sitting still, talking quietly and infrequently, and speaking in Standard English are rewarded. While none of these behaviors lend themselves to critical thinking or problem-solving, middle-class expectations demand that students demonstrate these skills to

achieve the ultimate goal of getting into an elite college. Later in life, this form of hegemony rewards those who marry a person of the opposite gender, attend religious institutions regularly, and work well-paying nine to five jobs that require multiple degrees. I assumed that because I was seeking out ways to improve my teaching, I must have already rejected the behavioral biases and poor pedagogy these authors were critiquing. I should have known that a few years of intense study was unlikely to completely counteract generations of privilege.

Then, for my Master's project, I decided to facilitate a writing workshop for five immigrant teenage girls in the low-income, urban school where I had been a biology teacher before leaving the classroom to pursue a doctoral degree in education. The workshop met three mornings a week in the teacher's lounge. All of the participants were my former students, and all of them were Chinese immigrants and second language learners. I conducted the project while taking a highly structured ethnographic methods class in which I was required to submit weekly assignments including a literature review, memos, interviews with teachers and students, and field notes. My final paper used my field notes, interviews, and some document analysis to examine the role of writing in students' in- and out-of-school lives. I never expected the project to reveal much about my own practice; rather, I felt its purpose was to teach my colleagues and I about my students' literacy practices.

Coincidentally, as I was completing my data analysis, in a separate course I was assigned a series of readings on the history of the American public school system. In the past, I would have approached these articles with disdain, writing off their content as descriptions of archaic educational practices that have long been exorcised from the classroom. This time, with my field notes fresh in my mind, I saw something different: I saw myself. Documenting my practice forced me to recognize the ways in which numerous elements of the system's racist, classist institutional tradition were subtly embedded in my pedagogy. As I went back through my field notes, I began to realize how far I was from my goal of being a progressive pedagogue. In fact, it became apparent that allowing my students complete freedom on their final project was the most progressive act of my entire teaching career, an act that left me riddled with uncertainty and anxiety. Much to my chagrin, the process of data analysis quickly made it clear to me that the educational theories I dismissed actually pervaded my practice and erected mental barriers that prevented me from being the teacher I wanted to be. All of these barriers came down to one key historical construct that must be overcome before anyone can become a progressive pedagogue: specifically, the idea that the teacher must hold all of the power in the classroom all the time.

In this reflection, I examine the genesis and perpetuation of three historically constructed components, or, "myths," of middle-class ideology in American education as they emerged in my pedagogy. I also examine why, as a hopeful progressive teacher, I have so much difficulty relinquishing oppressive habits for practices that are more closely aligned with my political beliefs. Through the process of documenting my practice, I realized that becoming a progressive pedagogue requires more than reading about where you would like your practice to go: it also requires researching where your practice came from. I am sure that there are far more myths than these. I have chosen these three because they represent my greatest weaknesses, and they are tied to insecurities I have had about my practice since I began teaching years ago.

Myth #1: Children Require Constant Control

Four of the girls huddled over their daily three-question grammar quizzes. Their lips moved noiselessly as they worked. The only sound in the room was the occasional muffled scrape of a pencil filling in multiple-choice bubbles.

The fifth chair was empty save for a puffy black coat and a red backpack with drawstrings. I stared silently at the space where my fifth student was supposed to be sitting.

When she entered the room a few moments later, she clutched a thin sheaf of typewritten pages. I shot her an accusatory look.

"Where were you?" I snapped.

She said she was stapling her research report in the main office, which adjoins the teachers' lounge where we have class.

"You need to tell me before you leave the room," I said.

She moved her head subtly and took her seat.

"Did you hear me?" I demanded.

“Yes,” she said. “I won’t do it again.”

“Thank you,” I replied curtly. “Let’s go over these quizzes.”

My field notes are riddled with examples of instances when I gratuitously exercised power over my students purely to prove to us all that I (and the middle class values that I represent) was in charge. I insisted that my five polite, mature, and focused students raise their hands before speaking, eliminate conversation during natural breaks in the class, and, of course, report to me each and every time they wished to leave the table.

This particular instance was an especially ridiculous incident of my need for control. My student was in absolutely no danger of breaking the rules when she got up to staple her papers. Although I had my back to the door leading to the office, I could hear everything that went on there, so it was highly unlikely that she would get away with anything without my knowledge. Furthermore, the area was always full of teachers and administrators. There were plenty of people around who would have kept her from getting into trouble. Even though I knew it was ridiculous to require them to ask permission to staple papers at the secretary’s desk a few feet away, I was convinced that small gestures like this one were necessary for maintaining absolute control, a condition I believed was required to fulfill the progressive pedagogical mandate to equalize power in the classroom (hooks, 1994).

Throughout my career, I implemented systems designed to encourage all of my students to respect each other’s participation and to be comfortable participating themselves. I kept tallies of the number of girls and boys I called on to make sure I was allowing members of both genders equal opportunities to speak. I expended great quantities of energy quelling the commentary of students who tended to dominate conversation and eliciting the opinions of those who usually remained silent. I reprimanded name-callers and eye-rollers before, during, and after class. I could not have put these systems into place without insisting that my students grant me the power to dictate the terms of their behavior. While I may have succeeded in creating a reasonably collaborative learning experience among my students, I rendered the experience incomplete by removing a potential collaborator whose contribution ought to have meant exactly as much as that of any other member of the classroom: myself. According to the definition I had developed myself, pedagogy is not truly progressive unless power has been equalized between teacher and student, especially when the teacher, like me, represents the middle-class authority that silences, devalues, and dis-empowers students’ communities.

Although most teachers would agree that a certain amount of order is required in any classroom for learning to take place, there is no logical reason for this order to stem from absolute discipline. After all, it is far more likely that micromanaging students’ actions and behaviors will lead to bitterness and rebellion than critical thinking and productive learning. Before conducting this ethnography, it never occurred to me that the power I exercised in my classroom might be anything other than what was absolutely necessary to promote equitable participation and meaningful dialogue. In reality, my attitude towards authority is reminiscent of an historical construct of middle-class authority that I found illogical and xenophobic when I read about it in academic journals, but perfectly reasonable when I applied it in my classroom.

The need to save the nation from potentially deviant, un-American adolescents shaped the public school system that we have today. Although schools certainly had humanitarian missions – a point addressed below – they also unabashedly served as instruments of social control (Noguera, 1995). Foremost among the historical trends that influenced the development of the American public school system was a reduction in child labor in the late 1800s (Halpern, 2002). The consequence of this reduction was the unleashing of an unprecedented number of unsupervised working-class children onto the streets of urban centers, a phenomenon that provoked anxiety among the middle class and generated a surge of legislation prohibiting everything from “loitering” to “playing street games” to “fire setting.” Although the alleged purpose of the legislation was to protect children from the streets, it was clear that its true purpose was to protect the streets from children, a necessity born out by late nineteenth century academics. During this time period, theories on child development described adolescents as dangerous because they represented a lower stage on the evolutionary scale than adults: teens were primitive savages that were not guaranteed to become as civilized as their parents (Lesko, 1996). Adolescents had the potential to become “normal” (a term psychologists defined using middle-class values and prescribed gender roles) if and only if they received the proper guidance. As “unformed humans” exposed to the immigrant culture of the streets, low-income adolescents were seen as particularly vulnerable to deviancy, especially if they lacked middle-class parental role models to teach them what the dominant hegemonic social classes had determined was socially acceptable behavior.

In keeping with this goal, schools became places where potentially delinquent children could be exposed to the aforementioned proper guidance (Noguera, 1995). Specifically, they were places where working class children were taught to defer to their middle-class teachers and administrators, a trend that I perpetuated in my own classroom. Consequently, the primary duties of educators were two-fold: to communicate knowledge as well as authority. In other words, teachers were instructed to train students to read, write, count, and do what they were told.

As a self-identifying liberal, modern educator, it was easy for me to denigrate historical constructions of power within the classroom as artifacts of a racist, classist, sexist era in American history. However, despite my best intentions, my actions revealed that I, too, believed students needed to learn to do what I told them to do, rather than what they believed was the right thing to do. Indeed, when a student left the room to staple her homework unannounced, I grew uncomfortable with the idea that she had exerted her agency without asking my permission, primarily because I felt her action was disrespectful. In reality, I was the one being disrespectful: I implied that she deserved less power than me, and that any decision she made without consulting my authority would necessarily be a poor one.

According to the definition of teaching for social justice offered above, a key facet of empowering members of marginalized populations is instilling individuals with the confidence to openly question the beliefs of those in power. In the classroom, this means showing students that, despite countless social messages to the contrary, their value systems and actions are just as valid as those of the their teachers. As a representative of the hegemony, I could have communicated this belief by respecting my students' agency. By insisting on monitoring their behavior so closely, I instead communicated that I doubted their right to share power. Rather than scrutinizing their every move for evidence of insurgency, I should have given them the opportunity to shape the behavioral expectations of our classroom so that it met all of our needs. Doing so would have created a safer, more collaborative climate that undoubtedly would have enhanced my students' learning experience by emphasizing the process of constructing knowledge.

As mentioned above, most teachers I know would agree that classrooms need rules to function. I, too, believe that discipline is an important part of learning. However, it behooves educators to prioritize classroom learning over discipline: as a wonderful mentor teacher once told me, students will focus on the lesson if they see their teacher focusing on the lesson. Lessons that are engaging and productive help students become invested in their work, thereby eliminating many of the problems teachers anticipate when they attempt to wield complete control.

Still, no teacher can be a perfect educator all the time, and no one can deny that every classroom needs a set of rules. While having rules also means having consequences, educators must think critically about the ways in which these consequences are enforced, and the messages underlying this enforcement. If students constantly disobey certain rules, teachers should consider asking their students why this is happening, rather than automatically enforcing consequences for the unwanted behaviors. Furthermore, educators should examine why they felt these rules were necessary in the first place, and whether their reactions to infractions of the rules are based on genuine concern about classroom climate or personal concern about their authority. For example, if I had considered my motivation for reprimanding my student for leaving the room without permission, I would have realized that leaving to staple an English paper after completing classwork was not a threat to the students' personal well-being, her ability to understand the lesson, or her classmates' concentration. Rather, it was a threat to my authority, albeit a mild one. There was no reason for me to react as stridently as I did.

Myth #2: Children Require Constant Surveillance

It became apparent that the girls were posting artwork and creative writing on their blogs. I logged onto a laptop and asked one of them to access her page.
"It's blocked," she said. "You can't look at blogs in school."

"Of course," I said, pushing my computer away. "It's so you don't get distracted from your schoolwork. Plus, blogs can be very dangerous. Lots of kids post personal information about themselves. Then people find them and hurt them."

"Not all the time," another student said. "Not everyone puts up stuff like that."

"Enough people do that it's a problem," I snapped. "Now let's continue with the lesson."

If my colleagues and I were correct in assuming that our students were using blogs irresponsibly, then we had two options for remedying the situation. The more progressive approach would be to teach students about the importance of protecting their privacy on the Internet. Choosing this path implies that we are confident that, given the proper information and the ability to act on this information, students will make responsible decisions about their behavior. In this case, there would be no need to block questionable sites because we, as educators, would put faith in our students' capacity to make productive decisions and to recover from their mistakes.

The second path, which is the one my colleagues and I chose, is to block students' access to the potentially dangerous situation – in this case, to block social Web sites. This approach converts the question of *if* students will abuse blogs into a question of *when.* Completely removing students' abilities to act on their agency implies that students are helpless without protection and

guidance because they are incapable of making wise decisions and controlling their behavior. This belief is often justified using evidence gleaned from years of observing students making "bad" choices. Unfortunately, agents of hegemony like myself rarely take time to evaluate whether the decision-making they observe among marginalized populations is "bad" or simply inconsistent with the value system inherent in the power structure. Again, the idea that members of low-income communities are prone to making ill-advised choices is historically built into the public school system.

As I soon learned societal anxieties about children and "the street" were not historically based on self-preservation alone: many adults were as concerned with the dangers the streets offered children as the dangers children created on the streets. These ranged from the physical peril of heavy "vehicular traffic" to the moral peril of succumbing to the temptation of illegal activities (Halpern, 2002). Implicit in this concern was the assumption that children lacked the agency and capability to make "good" decisions, *i.e.*, decisions that reflected middle-class values. Low-income parents – many of whom were immigrants – were blamed for these deficiencies (Noguera, 1995). Like their offspring, parents were considered too backwards to understand how they were supposed to act, let alone how they were supposed to teach their children "proper" behavior. A primary purpose of in- and after school programs was to curb delinquency by exposing at-risk youth to middle-class teachers, administrators, and humanitarians (Halpern 2002; Noguera, 1995). It was understood that privileged adults' upbringings ensured that they would be able to instill values in children that low-income parents lacked the intelligence and moral grounding to understand, let alone communicate.

The idea that low-income children and parents – particularly those of color -- are incapable of exercising, teaching, or learning self-regulation is alive and well today. It is rare to find a study of the causes of juvenile delinquency that does not somehow reference poor parenting as a significant risk factor for criminal and antisocial behavior (Rodney, 2002; Walker, 1991). Although it is easy to identify nineteenth century principles as racist and classist, the biases in recent studies is less apparent because they are allegedly supported by science and because they are modern, rather than out-dated. Of course, the aforementioned middle-class constructions of "normal" were also (supposedly) scientifically based, and few can dispute that these were overtly biased (Lesko, 1996). Although most modern juvenile delinquency studies make better use of the scientific method than their nineteenth century counterparts, the quantitative nature of these new studies tends to obscure the historical traditions that bias data collection by influencing the questions researchers ask. While most middle class academics and educators like myself are happy to interrogate our students about the (in)stabilities of their communities, we are less inclined to confront the ways in which the historical construction of our own, middle-class communities create cycles of disempowerment among low-income populations.

As mentioned, progressive pedagogy mandates the equalization of power between students and teachers (hooks, 1994). The purpose of this equalization is to render all opinions in the classroom equally deserving of respect, thereby creating an environment that subverts traditional hegemonic notions of inferiority and superiority. When we consider our students incapable of learning the basic reasoning skills required for exercising individual autonomy, we create an imbalance of respect, thereby eliminating the possibility for progressive pedagogy.

As educators, we constantly make decisions for our students that they should be able to make on their own. We rarely give students complete freedom to choose the topic of a research paper, the purpose of a science experiment, or the book they will be reading as a class. I routinely denied my students these freedoms because I was afraid their decisions would be personally and emotionally harmful. I envisioned them choosing to read poorly written books about sex or violence, pursuing research topics that were irrelevant and poorly researched, and destroying expensive lab equipment the while conducting experiments that were poorly designed and uninformative. It never occurred to me that students may actually be successful at these tasks, and that these successes may be the results of responsible choices.

My failure to recognize an alternative to bad decision making became especially clear to me when I visited my students' blogs on my home computer and realized how unfounded my suspicions were. None of girls had personal information on their sites, except for one student who used her real first name without her last name. They used the pages to display artwork and poetry and to post conversations with friends about topics ranging from the latest anime movie to their English assignments. These blogs were truly forums for personal expression, not avenues for advertising compromising information. My colleagues and I decided to block blogs because it never occurred to us that students could exercise personal freedom responsibly and productively.

Upon reflection, I realized that I hesitated to give my students choices in my classroom because I was afraid of the potential consequences of my students' failure. However, part of becoming a progressive educator is overcoming this fear by becoming comfortable with allowing our students to take risks, and we are confident that our students will emerge from the consequences of these risks with a better understanding of their world. Negative consequences of decisions do not necessarily snowball into crises: sometimes they are invaluable learning experiences that actually enhance decision-making skills. If students conduct poorly designed experiments with irrelevant research goals, we can ask them to redo these experiments until they effectively fulfill authentic purposes. If their research papers contain little evidence or support a morally questionable argument, we can send them back to the library. If students choose to read books with messages we find questionable, we can give them the tools

to critically evaluate these messages before they choose to act on them. Of course, it is also important that we, as educators, always remind ourselves to entertain the idea that there may not be any negative consequences to deal with. After all, as my student so cogently pointed out, no one makes bad decisions all the time. Our students are no exceptions.

Myth #3: Children Require Their Teachers to Think for Them

"Your final paper is due next Thursday," I said. "Until then, you can either schedule individual conferences with me or we can continue with workshops."

"What are workshops?" A student asked.

"What we've been doing for the past three classes," I told her. "We'll spend the week having group discussions about what your classmates think you should improve in your stories. I'll moderate the discussion, but I won't give any suggestions unless you ask me."

I assumed they would want to meet with me. I was the one who gave them the right answers. Their classmates only made guesses. Why settle for each other when they could work with me?

When my students remained silent, I said, "Raise your hand if you want to meet with me."
Five pairs of eyes darted around the room, assessing their peers' opinions. Their arms remained at their sides.

"Who wants to do workshops?"

Five hands shot into the air. Five smiles erased the wrinkles creasing five brows.

"Fine," I said, "workshops it is."

Inside, I groaned, sure that the final papers would be poorly written, poorly edited, and unbelievably boring.

Truthfully, I incorporated the first writing workshop into my curriculum in an attempt to help students practice identifying grammatical errors in context. I removed myself from the conversation not because I wanted to encourage my students to construct their own knowledge, but because I wanted to see whether they were at the point where they could recognize grammatical errors on their own. In my mind, having them find the errors themselves was a higher-order thinking exercise. Although I soon realized that writing workshops were a wonderful way to help my students think creatively and engage in authentic knowledge construction, my intention for the activity conformed, once again, to oppressive historical constructs of low-income communities as unable to engage in higher order thinking.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) describes the "banking system of education" as "…based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored, and used at a later date" (p. 5). hooks uses this concept to describe the American school system's emphasis on depositing information in students' memory banks instead of showing students ways to obtain or evaluate information. This emphasis on content over critical thinking leads to the breakdown of true dialogue, a hallmark of the equalized power structure of progressive pedagogy. Noddings (1992) defines true dialogue as an "open-ended" exchange in which no participant knows the conclusions the conversation will reach ahead of time. This means that classroom exchanges leading to a planned learning objective are not forms of true dialogue because one of the participants (the teacher) has a clear outcome in mind, as well as the power to steer the talk towards that outcome. In the vignette above, I created a situation in which I was a keeper of knowledge and therefore an ultimate authority by reducing writing to a series of grammar rules.

The absence of true dialogue in the classroom is probably a result of the aforementioned historical, institutional assumptions that low-income students and parents must be controlled and are incapable of independent thought (Halpern, 2002; Noguera, 1995). The assumptions that students lacked the ability to reason and that teachers possessed the exclusive rights to consequential knowledge rendered the idea of true dialogue untenable. After all, if students were incapable of contributing to the conversation, then what was the point of letting them talk? Predictably, the duty of imparting knowledge to youth was entrusted to middle-class teachers whose values aligned with the dominant paradigm (Lesko, 1996). In short, the banking system of education was based on the foregone conclusion that students would never have anything valuable to say unless their middle class teachers taught them what was valuable and what was not.

My hesitancy to include multiple collaborative writing workshops into my lesson plans was due to my subscription to the banking model of education, an unconscious adherence I shared with my colleagues. When I asked my students' English teacher (a woman who I respect for her years of experience teaching low-income, minority populations) how she thought I should address these deficiencies, she recommended that I develop a set of proofreading drills, activities she hoped she could also use in her classroom. My principal, whose progressive ideas about education often echoed my own, eagerly supported my idea to incorporate SAT questions into my lessons in the form of daily quizzes, saying that doing so would give my students concrete ways to exhibit their knowledge on standardized tests that could be reported as measurable gains. All three of us genuinely wanted our students to master the writing process because we wanted to give them access to quality college educations, which are prerequisites for participating in the power structure in the U.S. However, rather than approaching the process as an activity requiring critical thinking, we treated it as a series of facts which, when learned, could be strung together into an acceptable academic paper. Unintentionally, we had converted a creative act into a mechanical one, and we did so because of our liberal intentions.

When reading Noddings (1992) and hooks (1994), I tried to picture what true dialogue looked like. I immediately envisioned the numerous writing workshops I had participated in as an undergraduate, graduate student, and a professional. In these workshops, my peers, most of whom came from communities similar to my own, and I voluntarily critiqued each other's work. The emphasis was always on the revision process rather than on grammatical details, and multiple, contradictory suggestions were presented and encouraged. Most importantly, the exchanges were structured such that everyone was allowed the opportunity to voice his criticisms and suggestions, thereby creating a power structure in which every voice was equally valued and a platform in which true dialogue could occur.

It was then that I realized that my conception of writing workshops as vehicles for correcting mechanical mistakes was particular to the classroom environment in which I was a middle-class adult and my students were low-income adolescents. Although I embraced true dialogue in workshops in which most of the participants were middle-class adults of my own age or older, I rejected it when I had to create a model for my students. Because I took it for granted that my students were incapable of the critical thinking necessary to initiate or draw conclusions from true dialogue, I assumed that any writing workshop held in a classroom would be inferior to those I experienced with my peers. No matter how progressive I thought I was, my anxiety stemmed from the possible disruption of the power structure of which I was a part.

Ultimately, the risk I felt I was taking in allowing my students to guide each other through the revision processes was no risk at all. While I focused on grammar, my students did not. They gave each other global suggestions similar to the ones I had given and received in the writing workshops I attended with my peers. They listened carefully to each other, asked qualifying questions, and were always respectful. When they chose to ignore something, they gave reasons for this choice during the next session. In fact, they systematically demonstrated the very critical thinking skills and discrimination I assumed they lacked, and they did so without any instruction from me. Together, my students taught themselves to be excellent writers and readers. More importantly, they learned how to value each other's intellectual judgments. It turned out that during this particular exchange, I was the participant who had the most trouble recognizing and comprehending the unexpected outcome.

I was lucky to have a distinct parallel between my own experiences with true dialogue and the activity I was conducting in my classroom. While most of the examples of true dialogue in the personal lives of educators may not be directly transferable to the classroom, they can still inform our practice. During the upcoming presidential election, for example, we can watch the ways we interact with our peers in making decisions about whom we will vote for. As we do so, we can look for ways to incorporate these kinds of conversations into our classrooms. We can ask ourselves how we respond to our peers physically and verbally, and how we process the information they give us. We can then look for ways to transfer these practices into the classroom. We can also be more flexible about our learning goals for our students. After all, when we engage in true dialogue with our peers, we rarely do so when we are in search of facts. Instead, we do so to enhance our understanding of a subject, develop our own opinions, solve mutual problems, or create new ways of interacting with the world. All of these skills are invaluable in recognizing the need for change and enacting change in our communities. By consciously mimicking our own true dialogue in our classrooms, we can create forums for our students to develop these skills as well.

Conclusion

The night before our last class, I stayed up late reading and rereading the final drafts of my students' papers. I lost myself in their stories the way I get lost in great literature. I was stranded in the subway during the blackout. I was lost in a forest in Italy. I was pretending to understand Spanish on my first day of school in Venezuela. I was playing Mah Jong in my mother's basement. I was rescued by a secret agent who was also my future husband. I was surprised at how adeptly my students incorporated the literary devices they identified in the readings we did in class and the suggestions that their peers made during the writing workshops. But the greatest surprise of all was the absence of grammatical errors. With or without me, my students were learning to communicate in Standard English.

Before this project, I thought teaching was a perpetual power struggle between educators and students, and that learning could only take place when educators triumphed. I did not realize that the reason why progressive pedagogy is such an effective tool for teaching for social justice is that it eliminates the traditional, historically rooted classroom power struggle between educators and students before learning begins (hooks, 1994). The point of displacing hegemony in this way is to expose marginalized students to the possibilities inherent in a world where they are judged by no authority greater than themselves, a world where it is safe to trust themselves because their opinions and experiences are as valid as everyone else's. This approach naturally leads to intellectual experimentation and risk-taking, two prerequisites to thinking critically about oppression and acting on those thoughts.

I remain convinced that struggle is an inevitable part of teaching, especially teaching for social justice. However, as any activist knows, collective struggles are often more productive than solitary ones. The best way for educators to join their students in the pursuit of social justice is to consider their students as equal participants in this movement. This can only occur when educators like me learn to respect, trust, and value their students in the ways they assume their students should respect, trust, and value them. Changing the way we approach our students requires the honesty to assess our place in the power structure and the courage to challenge this place by rejecting assumptions we might have unconsciously adopted for an entire lifetime. As I have learned, the ways in which we wield power become so ingrained in us that the assumptions that created these practices are difficult to uncover.

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