

Bias and the Teachable Moment: Revisiting a Teacher Narrative

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Revisiting an episode of his own biased language in the classroom, the author tries to resist a conventional interpretation of events in the hope of raising useful questions.

The story of the story *is* the story.

Douglas Reichert Powell

First, then, comes the story.

I am teaching a first-year college composition class at a suburban community college in Arizona. The class is composed of about twenty students from varying backgrounds and ethnicities, a fact I am only dimly aware of. The idea that as a teacher I am largely ignorant of my students' personal histories, their respective heritages, and how they see themselves as a part of those heritages does not strike me as odd, if I've even thought about it at all.

Class that day has gone well enough, and our final activity is a group brainstorming session of possible topics for an upcoming argumentative essay. I want my students to choose a local focus, something immediately relevant to their everyday lives, with the hope that this will lead to writing that is both personally meaningful and civically aware. Some of the older students in the class own their own homes, and the conversation turns briefly to the pros and cons of homeowner associations. A student comments about the committees that run these associations with iron-fisted authority and how difficult it can be to change the rules with many decision makers involved in the process. Having had plenty of experience with the unique challenges of seminar-style management and leadership, I decide to add to the discussion. The situation seems similar to the old adage about too many chefs spoiling the broth, but what comes out of my mouth instead is this:

"Homeowners' associations may be a good case of too many chiefs and not enough Indians."

The words are barely out before shock washes over me. *Good Lord, did I actually say that?* I am dumbstruck. Panic creeps over me even as I scan my students' faces, searching for indications of surprise, offense, or outright disgust.

But no one in the class rises to denounce me for using an ethnically insensitive and ignorant cliché from a bygone era. In fact, no one seems to have noticed at all. Instead, another student begins speaking about her own experience with an HOA, and the discussion rolls on. I continue to make comments and suggest possible avenues for the assignment, but I've mentally dropped out of the conversation. I am mortified, my mind stuck on what I said. *My God! What if some of my students are Native American? I'm no racist!* And yet, those words have come out of my mouth. Mercifully, class is nearly over.

On the drive home, I try to analyze what has happened. But a defensive reaction is already settling in: I am quite sure I haven't used that phrase in at least fifteen years, probably longer—I've known for as long as I've been an adult that it is outdated and offensive. I rationalize that since I am very consciously and very purposefully not a racist, what I said was simply a freak occurrence, some kind of vestigial idiomatic oddity. And, after all, nobody in the class even noticed. My overriding desire is simply to bury the incident, vow to be even more careful when I speak, and forget about it. Besides, I know I'm not one of those teachers who get in trouble because of ignorant or offensive remarks, and that's what really counts, right?

But I'm fooling myself. I know that pretending that this episode hasn't happened is not only dishonest: it feels fundamentally *wrong*. No one noticed? How can I be certain of this? The sense of nausea and fear returns; I realize there's a lot more at stake here. In a personal sense, I'm taking the cowardly, selfish way out. A voice in my head intones that as a professional I have a moral obligation to my students. I am accountable for much more than course content and what I "officially" teach, says the voice. Any measure of integrity demands that I revisit with them what I said and make public its inappropriateness, offer an apology, and open the topic for discussion.

But I don't want to do this. No, I don't want to do this at all.

Stepping Back

It almost goes without saying that teachers in all fields are responsible for creating classroom environments free from bias and insensitivity to race, gender, religion, or any other human difference. Such responsibility may be vital for English teachers, especially, as we strive to establish communities of writers and spaces for critical thinking and conversation. No doubt many of us have developed homegrown strategies for dealing with issues of bias when they appear in our students' writing or during class discussions. Helping students recognize the contextual appropriateness and inappropriateness of language choices is, after all, part of our job.

But what do we do when *we* become the source of something insensitive or offensive?

When this happens, suddenly the obvious assumptions of the preceding paragraph—a passage that might very well form part of a "master narrative" of what good teachers do—are called into question, if not completely subverted. Like

many other teachers, my years of training were dominated by the implicit and unquestioned notion of the “teacher as hero”: a liberator of student minds, a challenger of assumptions, and a force against ignorance, among other roles (Tassoni and Thelin 4). All of this provided very little preparation for dealing with episodes that ran counter to this heroic vision. Typical day-to-day mistakes a teacher faces were characterized in my training as matters solvable through reflection and better planning; rarely did I find myself pondering deeper questions about my motivations, biases, and assumptions.

In “Blundering the Hero Narrative,” John Paul Tassoni and William Thelin point out that when teachers do speak up about embarrassing classroom moments, the discussion is usually private, perhaps taking the form of a sheepish teacher-lounge-type story (1). My own experience with issues of biased teacher talk is even more constrained: it simply wasn’t mentioned in any kind of professional conversation I can remember. My colleagues and I would easily tell about a bad class or a lesson that bombed, but our own biases, whatever they were, remained largely unspoken. At the same time, we *did* occasionally voice our annoyance with what we perceived as a dominant cultural ethos displayed by many of our students—a certain sense of middle-class European American privilege and entitlement that, we felt, misrepresented or disregarded other viewpoints. We might have defended our thinking by arguing that a bias toward a dominant way of seeing was not really a bias at all, simply part of an informed liberatory pedagogy: the “You can’t be neutral on a moving train” rationale. Our self-image as crusading enlighteners so bolstered, we could ignore the possibility that we all might have more deep-seated biases hidden beneath the layers of our own socialization.

My sense is that teachers tend to intellectualize this uncomfortable idea, pretending that over the years we’ve become bias- and stereotype-free. A student’s potential use of charged language will almost certainly be covered in a teacher education class at some point, if only as a simple classroom-management issue. A teacher’s possible use of such language, meanwhile, is a conspicuous nontopic. Prolonged discussions of biased language—its existence, sources, and ubiquity—are rare outside of rhetoric courses, and the absence of teachers as subjects in such discussions can carry an implied message: the issue is altogether a student-centered one, and teachers stand outside the arc of perpetration. As teachers trained in the heroic model, we set the standards of tolerance and respect for our students, end of story.

These ideal assumptions can result in something resembling a personal crisis when the inevitable insensitive statement springs from one’s mouth. If you teach long enough, it’s certain that no matter how fair-minded you may believe yourself to be, you’ll say something—probably quite accidentally—that can be considered (or simply *is*) hurtful, offensive, or demeaning. Each of us has been raised in a specific cultural context with its own ingrained language biases, and even with years of what may well be focused egalitarian thinking, academic training, and professionalization, it’s doubtful that all of our childhood prejudices have been accounted for and safely purged or neutralized. On reflection, if not immediately, I

imagine that most teachers would find this premise reasonable. If this is so, we can then turn our attention to how this knowledge—the awareness that some manner of bias is inherent in all our histories, identities, and language use, despite our best intentions—informs and complicates our lives as teachers.

In considering this subject, I'm using as a theoretical frame Tassoni and Thelin's critical-pedagogy perspective on teacher "blunders." In their aforementioned article—which serves as an introduction to a thematically linked collection of essays—the authors deconstruct the teacher-as-hero narrative and discuss how grappling with pedagogical missteps can help teachers "move toward a better understanding of blunders themselves and what they tell us about critical learning and teaching" (2). Teachers who specifically base their instruction upon a philosophy of critical pedagogy are more likely to find themselves confronted by classroom failures as their specific practices conflict with traditional assumptions, though Tassoni and Thelin point out that blunders can happen for any number of complex reasons (social, personal, professional) beyond the strictly political. Deconstruction of these reasons can be a first step toward understanding the forces at work in a given teacher's context. The authors recommend that the blunder be considered as "a point of departure [...] as critical teachers consistently reevaluate their aims and practices" (3–4). Thus the experience of failing as a teacher is not simply translated into a quick-fix technique that "solves" the mistake and so reasserts the teacher-as-hero concept through a revised lesson plan, for example, or a new activity. Instead, blunders in this light are considered in terms of reshaping teacher's identities and roles and as opening new spaces for discussion about the forms, relationships, and goals of democratic education.

With these considerations in mind, I return now to the story of my own blunder. I want to continue with a narrative of how I reacted as a teacher, followed by an attempt to interrogate this reaction in the hopes of raising questions about and locating moments of pedagogical tension within these events.

Response and Reaction

Later that same evening, my conscience gnawing at me, I talk the matter over with a close friend, and I realize that maybe I have before me a genuine "teachable moment," an opportunity to begin a real conversation with my students about biased language, so prevalent in our society but so un-talked-about in any sustained and complex way. I need to use myself as an example and a model, I decide. Had I been more quick-thinking and courageous, I might have immediately drawn attention to what I'd said and opened a discussion about it there and then. The opportunity, however, is not lost. I decide to make such a discussion the centerpiece of the next class—it will be the first thing we start with. In the meantime, I have some thinking to do.

It will do no good to offer a simple *mea culpa* to the class and portray the incident as some random slip-up, with the take-home lesson something like "Just Be Extra Careful About What You Say." I know this would be a cop-out. It would

send the message that language is primarily context-free, that it exists separately from our lives and identities, that it all boils down to being politically correct so one does not offend the mystifying sensitivities of “others.” And it is too neat, suggesting an absolute delineation between the acceptable and the offensive that doesn’t deal with the whos and the whys, but just ends with the remonstrance that, for this class at least, “too many chiefs and not enough Indians” has officially been added to the off-limits area. If I really want to make the discussion meaningful, I need to look elsewhere. I need to start with my own life, and that involves asking some potentially uncomfortable questions. I need to find honest reasons—or something that at least approaches honesty—rather than excuses. I need to use my life as a text, I decide, so that my students might begin thinking about their own. I don’t realize it at the time, but I am considering bell hooks’s definition of teaching as a performative act, wherein my own example will “serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged” (11). I am also unknowingly addressing her argument for reciprocal community building in the classroom:

The moment of collective participation and dialogue means that students and professor respect—and here I invoke the root meaning of the word, “to look at”—each other, engage in acts of recognition with one another, and do not just talk to the professor. Sharing experiences and confessional narratives in the classroom helps establish communal commitment to learning. (186)

I begin the next class feeling both nervous and exhilarated. Of course I have made mistakes or misstatements as a teacher in the past, and over time I have tried to discard the mask of flawless expert for a more realistic persona through which self-corrections and admissions of ignorance have been more normal events. But I am in uncharted territory here. I am going to talk about *That Which Is Not Talked About*.

I begin class by telling my students that I want to bring up and discuss “something inappropriate, something ethnically insensitive I’d said” during the previous lesson. Immediately the classroom grows quiet—I suddenly have *everyone’s* keen attention. I remind them of our discussion, explain what I thought I’d intended to say, and then tell them what I actually said. Once again I scan the room, checking expressions. A few confused looks, a few nods. A student speaks up: “It doesn’t seem like a big deal to me. It’s just a saying. It’s not like it’s an insult.”

“Well,” I respond, “to me it really is, in what it suggests.” And then I start talking about how the statement lumps all Native American people into one category. I tell them that it’s condescending because it takes a large number of complex cultures and reduces them to a casual, inaccurate comparison. I explain that if it doesn’t seem as harsh as a direct racial slur, it’s more about what it implies: that Native American tribes and cultures are indistinguishable and so by extension, unworthy of individual recognition and respect. Then I ask them if they know of any similar terms that have some kind of intolerance or ignorance at their root. Immediately, a student provides an example. “Indian giver,” she says. “It means someone who gives gifts and then takes them back.” (Hirschfelder lists similar

phrases that rely on derogatory or distorted visions of Native American cultures, including “sitting Indian style,” “going on the warpath,” and “let’s have a powwow” [75].)

The conversation continues. I am running point, asking questions, providing examples, trying to shape and fuel a discussion. My students agree that outright racial insults have largely disappeared from acceptable public discourse. But I point out that a lot of subtle racial language is still common. I ask them if they’d ever heard the phrase “to Jew someone down” as a reference to getting a better business deal. More nods. “My uncle says that all the time,” a student says. I admit to using that very phrase myself as a kid, numerous times. “Why did I do it?” I ask. “Because I didn’t like Jews? Not at all. It was simply something I’d heard people say in my neighborhood, and it never occurred to me until later on that it might be offensive.” If anything, I explain, I might have thought at the time that it was somehow a compliment, since frugality and getting your money’s worth are obsessive values in my family. Of course, it probably didn’t help that I knew no Jewish people either, or if I did, I didn’t realize it.

I mention another very common term used in my childhood: “gypped,” meaning “ripped off,” as in “Wow, I really got gypped trading baseball cards with Carl.” This one is also quite familiar to my students, and many of them agree that they use the term now. But when I ask them, no one knows where it came from or why it might be offensive. I explain the word’s racist origin—the belief that Gypsies were innate criminals and thieves. (I’d spent several years teaching English in Latvia as a Peace Corps volunteer, and I feel fairly confident in speaking about Gypsies as a universal underclass in Europe.) The fact that the Romany people aren’t a very common ethnic group in America, I point out, may explain why “gypped” may seem innocuous to a lot of people. But did unfamiliarity with an ethnic group make it any more acceptable to use such terms? In these ways, I explain, distorted and uninformed views of others are normalized and perpetuated through language. This is what I want them to understand.

Our discussion of these examples seems to be making sense to the class. But I want to show that often this kind of language use isn’t some free-floating linguistic quirk. Instead, it comes out of the culture of our lives; it can be embedded in our minds through our upbringing. In this sense, all of our language use is personal. So next I tell them about where I came from and what I’d learned. I tell them my story.

I start with the stereotypes of American Indians that pervaded my youth: games of “cowboys and Indians” with my friends, old Westerns with savages on scalping raids, a noble Indian on horseback shedding a tear over modern pollution, the Washington Redskins and the Cleveland Indians and the Kansas City Chiefs, “Injun Joe” from Tom Sawyer, rain dances and smoke signals and peace pipes, comic-book Indians speaking in pidgin. I tell them about Chief Knock-a-Homa, the live mascot of the Atlanta Braves, who’d emerge from his teepee in left field and dance around in full costume whenever the home team hit a home run. (The Braves retired the Chief in the 1980s, but the Tomahawk Chop—rocking your

forearm back and forth in a hatchet motion while singing what passes for an “Indian” battle chant—remains a fan favorite at Turner Field in Atlanta.)¹

I tell them about my parents, who taught me not to judge others by race or background, yet were themselves not perfect. For instance, though my mother (who is English) had nothing but contempt for people with racist views, her disdain didn’t extend to jokes about the Irish. For a time during my childhood, the Irish joke was in our family the equivalent of the Polish joke in other households.

I talk at length about my teenage and college years, how I gradually came to realize that some common assumptions I held were outdated or offensive. How I’d learned somewhere that the preferred term was “Native Americans,” not “American Indians.” How I hadn’t known such people personally, even though I did have a couple of friends who claimed some fraction of Indian heritage far up the family tree, as a sort of hip multicultural bona fide.

I tell them about other experiences: using the term “Oriental” in a graduate class in reference to a character in a novel and being corrected by the professor (she told me that “Asian” was now the more appropriate term), and my ambivalence about and gradual acceptance of this new knowledge.² And finally I tell them about moving to the American Southwest, and how Native Americans finally materialized for me as real people: as neighbors, as friends, as students in my classes. At points during this monologue, students ask questions, make comments, relate their own memories, tell their own stories. Everyone seems interested. The topic feels rich and relevant. It feels like we’re getting somewhere.

Reflection and (Re)Direction

In an earlier draft of this essay, the next section dealt with how I changed the curriculum of my class for the next three or four weeks as a result of this experience, in an attempt to move students toward considering their own possible biases through shared writing. This impromptu unit borrowed heavily from the work of Jeffrey Berman and his book *Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom*; in fact, I lifted almost verbatim Berman’s three writing assignments from his chapter titled “The Dark Side of Diversity.” I detailed how I wrote these weekly assignments along with my students, and how (again following Berman’s model) students could choose from three options with their work: they could read their writing aloud to the class, have it read anonymously by me, or elect not to publish in this way at all (though I still collected and read and commented upon their work privately).

I continued on in the original draft to summarize some of the range of topics my students grappled with, and I cited one student’s work in particular that I felt exemplified the kind of difficult yet thoughtful grappling with personal bias that I was looking for. I also included a brief mention of research suggesting that teacher self-disclosure helps to create a climate of trust in the classroom, and concluded the article by reflecting on how the overall experience had helped to shape my pedagogy positively in my current position as a teacher educator.

In short, I did what Tassoni and Thelin point out teachers often do when they confess to a blunder: they “talk about a problem and then explain how they subsequently fixed it by isolating the cause and devising a technique as a remedy,” thus avoiding a deeper investigation of classroom dynamics (1). Following this pattern, I shaped the story as an unforeseen problem solved through thoughtful teacher action, complete with a set of clear justifications and a comfortable sense of closure: I’d blundered but I had learned from it and grown and would blunder no more (at least not with this subject). Furthermore, as one enlightened I could now guide others by way of my clearer seeing. This was a summative vision of a teacher back in control, constructing a personal legend that had been “produced, paced, plotted, measured, i.e., tidied up” (Powell 10). In my desire to create a sense of personal and pedagogical resolution, I mythologized my experience, ignoring that which didn’t fit and polishing certain elements so they took on evidentiary and symbolic status.

I’m going to set aside that version now to try a different approach. In keeping with Tassoni and Thelin’s concept of blundering teachers searching for change while making their missteps “recognizable to other critical pedagogues, who, in turn, can help revise teaching, the academy, and culture in democratic ways” (6), I’d like to use this section to cast a critical eye back on the teaching decisions I made during this experience. By doing this I hope to resist the oft-illusory pull toward closure and certainty, as well as the tendency to treat the episode as merely a tool for solving a particular problem. Perhaps this way the experience can become “not a tool, but a set of tool-like problems” instead (Powell 12).

As I look over how I approached my confessional discussion of bias with my students, I’m struck immediately by how much of the talking was done by me. Yes, the topic was centered on something I’d said; yet, I wonder now if pedagogically the best approach was to keep the attention on me. I wanted to use myself as a sort of case in point—an object (subject?) lesson—for several reasons: to make my thinking process somewhat transparent so that students could understand the subtleties of bias in language, and to help efface the idea that as a teacher I was above the influence of such usage. My goal, I suppose, was to help them feel more at ease as a preparation for making similarly candid self-investigations, as well as less reluctant to share the eventual results.

And yet in thinking about why I did what I did, I’m encountering friction already. Planning the class, I’d assembled a list of what I’d considered to be typical yet under-the-radar examples of biased language (“gypped”), and I’d spent the previous week pondering my own life and considering how to frame a useful example for what I wanted them to do. Curiously, through all of this planning—in which I was ostensibly considering the culturally privileged space I occupied as a white male—I didn’t think much about my identity and position of authority in my own classroom. I could enter such a public confessional fairly safely, but this was not necessarily the case for my students. I wonder now about the classroom power relationships I didn’t acknowledge, and I question the assumption that the model I presented was somehow universally appropriate for others with different backgrounds.

What other opportunities did I not consider when I chose a very teacher-centered and teacher-explicated format for this “discussion”? In focusing on my own history as an example, in what ways did I limit how students might think about the topic? Implicitly, my story served as a “narrative template,” communicating that *this is what thinking about language bias through a personal history looks like*. But what other options existed? I could have dramatized the experience instead, made it a hypothetical scenario, as Douglas Reichert Powell describes, and asked students to write a reaction and then work in groups to coordinate a more comprehensive response (6). I could have used what students already knew about language bias—their own examples, their own means of telling—as the basis for the discussion. This doesn’t mean I would ditch my own story, but maybe it would emerge in another context, less a foregrounded demonstration and more a voice among voices (even while acknowledging that traditional power relationships in a classroom can never be erased completely).

And as I write this, I’m realizing that my decision to give the subject a teacher-focused introduction—in which I dispense a series of thought-provoking examples and discussion points—is a pattern I still favor, especially when we deal with a topic that I’m particularly fond of or fascinated by. When I’m thus fired up, I slip into a kind of teacher-as-magician mode, part conjurer, part entertainer, part expert. My explicit goal here is to stimulate as powerful an interest in the topic as I feel, and yet, how might this song-and-dance also be seen? *Look what I have in my bag of teacherly tricks! What clever and thought-provoking examples! What sharp and insightful questions!* Intentional or not, this often becomes a show: my show. The students gaze on, a reacting audience, as I wow them with the next scintillating PowerPoint slide or captivating prop. How does this approach jibe with my expressed teaching beliefs, which are some kind of ideal amalgam of expressionist and social-constructionist philosophies? Yes, at some point I do place students in situations in which they have to generate personally relevant meaning themselves, and then rework this meaning through community case making, consensus building, project producing, and so on. But does my own practice run counter to these beliefs, as I slide so easily into the heroic teacher role as a (the) way to get students thinking? And what possibilities am I missing to encourage students to articulate the assignment concepts themselves and, by extension, define the class as their own?

The success of the three-week unit that followed my confessional example is, frankly, ambiguous. In my earlier draft, I tried to string together some manner of support for my general impression that what we did as a class was worthwhile and productive, that the writing exercises moved students to new considerations about their own prejudices. I still feel this is true, but only in part. I also feel confident that my participation was a factor in getting some students to disclose as well. And yet, despite my diligent attempts to build this case, there is no guarantee that this actually happened, as a reviewer of that manuscript noted:

I am less convinced by the importance of self-disclosure. There is no direct connection between your revelations and your students’ writing. I’m also

troubled by the focus on honesty and authenticity. You're assuming that your honesty [was] transformed into their honest re-creation of experiences with bias when we have no way of knowing whether their writing recounted honest and/or authentic experiences.

Assumption was indeed all I had by way of evidence, that and some kind of intuitive feeling that what we were doing felt more honest and "real" than other more typical activities. As a prospective teacher-researcher, I had the perhaps understandable urge to assemble "evidence" of some sort that would justify the legitimacy of my conclusions. A closer look at what I asked students to do (and my assumptions in doing so), however, is probably more useful in this case than trying to "prove" some kind of accomplishment.

I see now that my decision to once again employ a top-down approach—in the form of Berman's writing assignment ideas—had the effect of discounting potentially more relevant prompts that the class might have generated themselves. By my deferring to a higher authority in the shape of a published text, the inception of these writings became twice removed from the particulars of the students in the class. Even as I tried to embody one version of a democratic classroom by completing the writing assignments as well and "putting myself out there" as an equal—as "just another writer"—the artificial frame of the rhetorical context might have worked to opposite ends, emphasizing an arbitrary and preestablished rationale, a situation for writing transmitted through the traditional teacher-and-text vessel. I'm left wondering now what kind of writing prompts might have evolved from the students' own talk and experiences, how they might have decided as a class what to write about, and what effect these local decisions might have had on how they wrote and the overall atmosphere of the class during those weeks.

It is also interesting to note that the student whose work I chose to highlight in my original draft—as evidence of someone grappling successfully and honestly with his own experiences with biased language—was a white male from a working-class background, that is, someone very much like me. I feel a little disconcerted by this fact, and I'm not sure what to do with it or what it means, except to put it out there as a question-generating tool. Did I respond to his writing more because it resembled, in content or form or voice, my own confessional explorations? On the other side of the coin, did I perhaps *not* see the writing of other students as meeting my unspoken expectations?

I also find it helpful now to problematize my own participation in the writing we did. The idea of teachers writing alongside students as a means of making transparent the writing act and democratizing the classroom is advocated by many prominent figures in the field of writing instruction (Nancie Atwell, Donald Murray, and Tom Romano spring to mind, and there are many others). In terms of liberatory pedagogy, the case can be made that we can't honestly expect students to take chances with their writing if we are not willing to accept such challenges ourselves. bell hooks puts the concept this way:

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to

empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (21)

I was introduced to the teacher-as-writer idea for the first time as a student in a class with G. Lynn Nelson, and I'd felt that his participation in assignments altered the usual dynamics of power in the classroom. I was eager to experiment with the approach in my own classes. Likewise, the "publishing" that I arranged as a teacher was a version of Nelson's "Feather Circle," and following each weekly assignment and public reading I asked students to write "thank-you notes" as homework, addressed to those writers whose work they'd appreciated or found meaningful or powerful (*Writing and Being* 87–88). I asked students to be specific in these notes—pointing out how the writing had made a personal connection with them as readers, rather than offering a critique—and I wrote them as well. As Nelson explains in his thank-you note instructions, "[T]elling [writers] specifically and carefully will help both you and them. It will help make you both more aware of the power in real writing and more aware of what works in your own writing, and of the gifts that we can give one another" ("Writing"). Essential in Nelson's work and to this unit, I felt, was the notion of deep listening, attending to one another first without the mental screen of judgment and criticism.

Of all the changes I've made in my teaching in the past several years, my own writing and sharing with students seems like the most fundamental. Positive student comments on my course evaluations often mention this aspect of the class, and I know—or rather, I *feel*—that I've grown from the process both as a writer and as a teacher. Nevertheless, I still think it helpful to reposition this aspect of my teaching in light of my use of it in this particular experience.

The rationale for teachers writing—in the classroom and with their students—is explored by Tim Gillespie in "Joining the Debate: *Shouldn't Writing Teachers Write?*" Gillespie lists many reasons in support of the teacher-as-writer concept, and part of his argument hinges on writing as a matter of credibility for English teachers:

There is a norm of demonstration that helps establish educational professionalism: Violin teachers demonstrate to their students how to move the bow, shop teachers show how to work the drill press [. . .] all as part of their regular routines. We would expect no less of them. When we writing teachers write and share our work with students, we are asserting ourselves as equally professional. (40)

Gillespie's point is well-taken, especially in a craft-learning sense. But in terms of demonstrating what counted as typical or "real" disclosure in the case of my classroom, my own writing may have been fraught with implications I wasn't willing to consider at the time. I was trying to wear two masks at once—teacher and fellow writer—while eliding the potential conflict between these roles. On the surface, my assignments asked us all to explore our own racial, ethnic, and class identities,

without fully acknowledging that our own classroom was a site of power demonstration and negotiation.

My own participation in the writing is complicated further with the “thank-you note” concept. I asked students to respond to those writers they’d been touched or moved by rather than to everyone, the idea being that providing specific feedback in such a fashion was more authentic than a required response to everyone. Again, I followed the same procedure as students in writing these notes. Although I framed the notes themselves as a means of praising writers and telling them what worked personally for me as a reader, instead of as a form of objective peer criticism, my participation in the role of “just another reader” appears to obscure certain realities. The fact was, as a reader, I was not the same as everyone else in the class. To ignore classroom power dynamics is not necessarily to make them disappear. Furthermore, in adhering to the principles of note writing, I did not write notes to all students following each set of writings. Ostensibly I wrote only to those whose writing I’d found personally powerful, even though I tried to spread such feedback around eventually to all students, which in itself is a violation of the concept. This was muddling through a situation—blundering even—trying to serve differing philosophies at once. I was attempting to juggle notions of my personal preference as a writer and reader with the standard issues of fairness and equity as a teacher, and I was pretending that there wouldn’t be bowling pins lying all over the floor when the lesson was over.

Conclusion

John Ramage, who taught a Theory and Teaching of Composition class I took as a graduate student, once remarked that part of our job as writing instructors was to make our students more complicated people. I’ve come to see more clearly the reflexivity of this notion in struggling with the ideas in this essay, which has turned into a process of complication for me.

When I sat down to write about this experience, I saw it as an opportunity to discuss a taboo situation and its positive aftermath, with the aim of demonstrating how it might be possible to use such events as points of departure in creating engaging writing assignments. I saw my own blunder transformed into a “teachable moment,” through which I was able to guide students toward recognizing and discussing the role of biased language in their own lives. The message—or better yet, the *answer*—the essay provided to other teachers would be clear: be on the lookout for similar moments in your own teaching lives to similarly exploit for positive purposes.

In revisiting, rethinking, and rewriting, I’ve come now to a different end. I am far less convinced of the benefits of the approach I took, and I’ve raised many questions and provided few if any answers. I hope these questions are somehow useful to other teachers in at least hinting at the multiple complexities in taking a liberatory pedagogical approach toward such subjects and episodes.

As my intent with this piece has shifted, so has the meaning of the “teachable moment” of the title. While I hope that my students found the experience beneficial, I’m suddenly aware that “teachable” in this context applies mostly to me and is an evolving term, slow to present itself. So is the “moment” for teaching, originally my utterance of a biased phrase, now no longer a single Newtonian point in time and space—measurable, plot-able, classifiable, fully knowable—but some kind of Einsteinian phenomenon, a flux of different perspectives and a field of questions, shifting through time. In modern physics, becoming comfortable with uncertainty is not an end in itself, but a means for moving toward better ways of seeing and understanding both the subject and how one interacts with it. I think something similar has ended up being my goal here. ◀

Notes

1. For an in-depth analysis of Native American stereotypes in children’s toys, books, and school texts in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, see Arlene Hirschfelder’s *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children: A Reader and Bibliography*.
2. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is often cited in the critical reassessment of the uses and connotations of the term “Oriental.”

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DOWN SIZED

I knew him first as the tough talker
on the junior high bus,
one seat behind me and giddy
that he'd knocked Joe Simms
to the sidewalk,
his prize a tooth-deep gash
across the knuckles,
fresh wound he cherished like gold.
No prize shines for him now as he glowers
from the back of my classroom,
an idle machinist gone paunchy with beer,
each essay a curse he hurls
at "greedy bosses," or "lucky Mexicans"
whose paychecks should be his.
The anger sparks hotter every paper
I return, margins marred by red ink—
bitter proof I can offer only words
to lift him from the sidewalk.

C. D. Albin

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