

## Building a Teaching Community

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### A Dialogue

In their introduction to the essay collection *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, editors Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren emphasize that those critical thinkers working with issues of pedagogy who are committed to cultural studies must combine “theory and practice in order to affirm and demonstrate pedagogical practices engaged in creating a new language, rupturing disciplinary boundaries, decentering authority, and rewriting the institutional and discursive borderlands in which politics becomes a condition for reasserting the relationship between agency, power, and struggle.” Given this agenda, it is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention. It is fashionable these days, when “difference” is a hot topic in progressive circles, to talk about “hybridity” and “border crossing,” but we often have no concrete

examples of individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern with teaching practices.

To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences. My first collaborative dialogue was with philosopher Cornel West, published in *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life*. Then I participated in a really exciting critical exchange with feminist literary critic Mary Childers, published in *Conflicts in Feminism*. The first dialogue was meant to serve as a model for critical exchange between male and female, and among black scholars. The second was meant to show that solidarity can and does exist between individual progressive white and black feminist thinkers. In both cases there seemed to be much more public representation of the divisions between these groups than description or highlighting of those powerful moments when boundaries are crossed, differences confronted, discussion happens, and solidarity emerges. We needed concrete counter-examples that would disrupt the seemingly fixed (yet often unstated) assumptions that it was really unlikely such individuals could meet across boundaries. Without these counter-examples I felt we were all in danger of losing contact, of creating conditions that would make contact impossible. Hence, I formed my conviction that public dialogues could serve as useful interventions.

When I began this collection of essays, I was particularly interested in challenging the assumption that there could be no points of connection and camaraderie between white male scholars (often seen, rightly or wrongly, as representing the embodiment of power and privilege or oppressive hierarchy) and marginalized groups (women of all races or ethnicities,

and men of color). In recent years, many white male scholars have become critically engaged with my writing. It troubles me that this engagement has been viewed suspiciously or seen merely as an act of appropriation meant to enhance opportunistic agendas. If we really want to create a cultural climate where biases can be challenged and changed, all border crossings must be seen as valid and legitimate. This does not mean that they are not subjected to critique or critical interrogation, or that there will not be many occasions when the crossings of the powerful into the terrains of the powerless will not perpetuate existing structures. This risk is ultimately less threatening than a continued attachment to and support of existing systems of domination, particularly as they affect teaching, how we teach, and what we teach.

To provide a model of possibility, I chose to engage in a dialogue with Ron Scapp, a white male philosopher, comrade, and friend. Until recently he taught in the philosophy department at Queens College, and worked as the Director of the College Preparatory Program in the School of Education, and the author of a manuscript entitled *A Question of Voice: The Search for Legitimacy*. Currently, he is Director of the Graduate Program in Urban Multi-Cultural Education at the College of Mount St. Vincent. I first met Ron when I came to Queens College in the company of twelve students who were taking the Toni Morrison seminar I taught at Oberlin College. We went to a conference on Morrison where she spoke, and where I gave a talk as well. My critical perspective on her work, especially *Beloved*, was not well received. As I was leaving the conference, surrounded by students, Ron approached me and shared his responses to my ideas. This was the beginning of an intense critical exchange about teaching, writing, ideas, and life. I wanted to include this dialogue because we inhabit different locations. Even though Ron is white and male (two locations that bestow specific powers and privileges), I have taught primarily at private institu-

tions (deemed more prestigious than the state institutions where we both now teach) and have higher rank, and more prestige. We both come from working-class backgrounds. His roots are in the city, mine in rural America. Understanding and appreciating our different locations has been a necessary framework for the building of professional and political solidarity between us, as well as for creating a space of emotional trust where intimacy and regard for one another can be nourished.

Over the years, Ron and I have had many discussions about our role as critical thinkers, professors in the academy. Just as I have had to confront critics who see my work as “not scholarly, or not scholarly enough,” Ron has had to deal with critics posing the question of whether he is doing “real philosophy,” especially when he draws on my work and that of other thinkers who have not had traditional training in philosophy. Both of us are passionately committed to teaching. Our shared concern that the role of the teacher not be devalued was a starting point for this discussion. It is our hope that it will lead to many such discussions, that it will show that white males can and do change how they think and teach, and that interaction across and with our differences can be meaningful and enrich our teaching practices, scholarly work, and habits of being within and outside the academy.

*bell hooks:* Ron, let's start with talking about how we see ourselves as teachers. One of the ways that this book has made me think about my teaching process is that I feel that the way I teach has been fundamentally structured by the fact that I never wanted to be an academic, so that I never had a fantasy of myself as a professor already worked out in my imagination before I entered the classroom. I think that's been meaningful, because it's freed me up to feel that the professor is something I become as

opposed to a kind of identity that's already structured and that I carry with me into the classroom.

*Ron Scapp:* And in a similar but perhaps slightly different mode, it's not so much that I never wanted to be a professor—I never thought about it. All my life was very much outside the classroom. Many of my friends never went on to finish college—some of them didn't finish high school—so there was not the thing about school as a professional track, and I think your not wanting to be a professor was not wanting that professional identification as such. I never even thought about it.

*bh:* But like you said, I didn't either. I mean, as a young, black woman in the segregated South, I thought—and my parents thought—that I would return to that world and be a teacher in the public school. But there was never any idea that I could be a university professor because, truth be told, we didn't know of any black women university professors.

*RS:* In a different but similar way, my parents, working class, saw education as really a means to an end, not the end point, so that as one got a university education, one went on to be a lawyer or a doctor. For them it was a means to enhance your economic status. Not that they look down at university professors, it just wasn't what one *did*. One got educated to earn money, a living, and start a family.

*bh:* How long have you been teaching?

*RS:* I started at LaGuardia Community College when I graduated Queens College in 1979. I was in the remedial basic skills department. We taught remedial reading and English.

*bh:* And then you went on to get your Ph.D. in philosophy?

*RS:* Yes, so I was teaching during graduate school. Since 1979 I've been involved teaching part-time or full-time. So, what's that, fourteen years?

bh: I've been teaching since I was 21. As a graduate student I taught my own courses using African American Literature and African American women's stuff just because I was interested in doing that and there was a student body willing to take those courses. But I was a late bloomer in terms of getting my Ph.D., even though I was already in the classroom. I see myself having been in the college classroom for 20 years. It's interesting that you and I would meet when I brought my Oberlin students to Queens for a conference. I think that part of what we connected to was a concern, evidenced by the paper I gave, with not just the academic work we were doing in the classroom, but how that academic work affects us beyond the classroom. We've spent the years since our meeting talking about pedagogy and teaching; one of the things that has connected us is that we both have a real concern with education as liberatory practice and with pedagogical strategies that may be not just for our students but for ourselves.

RS: Absolutely. That's also a nice way of understanding or describing how I, in fact, came to feel more and more comfortable about the role of professor.

bh: I want to return to the idea that somehow it was my disinvestment in the notion of the professor or academic as my identity that I think has made me more willing to question and interrogate this role. If perhaps we look at where I really do see my identity, which is more often as a writer, maybe I'm much less flexible in imagining that practice than I am in seeing myself as a professor. I feel I've benefited a lot from not being attached to myself as an academic or professor. It's made me willing to be critical of my own pedagogy and to accept criticism from my students and other people without feeling that to question how I teach is somehow to question my right to exist on the planet. I feel that one of the things blocking a lot

of professors from interrogating their own pedagogical practices is that fear that *"this is my identity and I can't question that identity."*

RS: We were talking about professional direction—that's maybe an awkward expression—an attempt to get at a sense of calling. We talked about the difference between seeing the title of professor or university teacher or even just teacher itself as a mere professional bridge like lawyer or doctor, a term that within our own working-class communities brought prestige or significance to who we already were. But as teachers I think our emphasis has, over the years, been to affirm who we are through the transaction of being with other people in the classroom and achieving something there. Not just relaying information or stating things, but working with people.

We were talking a little bit earlier about the way in which we are physically in that space, coming into it from the community.

bh: One of the things I was saying is that, as a black woman, I have always been acutely aware of the presence of my body in those settings that, in fact, invite us to invest so deeply in a mind/body split so that, in a sense, you're almost always at odds with the existing structure, whether you are a black woman student or professor. But if you want to remain, you've got, in a sense, to remember yourself—because to remember yourself is to see yourself always as a body in a system that has not become accustomed to your presence or to your physicality.

RS: Similarly, as a white university teacher in his thirties, I'm profoundly aware of my presence in the classroom as well, given the history of the male body, and of the male teacher. I need to be sensitive to and critical of my presence in the history that has led me there. Yet it's complicated by the fact that you and I are both sensitive to—and

maybe even suspicious of—those who seem to be retreating away from a real, maybe radical consciousness of the body into a very conservative mind/body split. Some male colleagues are hiding behind this, repressing their bodies not out of deference but out of fear.

*bh:* And it's interesting that it is in those private spaces where sexual harassment goes on—in offices or other kinds of spaces—one has to experience the revenge of the repressed. We talked about Michel Foucault as an example of someone who in theory seemed to challenge those simplistic binary oppositions and mind/body splits. But in his life practice as a teacher, he clearly made a separation between that space where he saw himself as a practicing intellectual—where he not only saw himself as a critical thinker but was seen as a critical thinker—and that space where he was *body*. It really is clear that the space of high culture was where he was in mind, and the space of the street and street culture (and popular culture, marginalized culture) was where he felt he could be most expressive of himself within the body.

*RS:* He's quoted as saying that he felt most free in the baths in San Francisco. In his writing maybe there isn't so much of that division and dualism, but as far as I know—never having been in a classroom with him—he took the pose of the traditional French intellectual very seriously.

*bh:* As a traditional *white* male French intellectual. It's important that you add that because we can't even name any black male French intellectuals off the bat. Even though we know that they must exist; like the rest of Europe, France is no longer white.

I think that one of the unspoken discomforts surrounding the way a discourse of race and gender, class and sexual practice has disrupted the academy is precisely the challenge to that mind/body split. Once we start

talking in the classroom about the body and about how we live in our bodies, we're automatically challenging the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutionalized space. The person who is most powerful has the privilege of denying their body. I remember as an undergraduate I had white male professors who wore the same tweed jacket and rumpled shirt or something, but we all knew that we had to pretend. You would never comment on his dress, because to do so would be a sign of your own intellectual lack. The point was we should all respect that he's there to be a mind and not a body.

Certain feminist thinkers—and the two people who come to my mind in this way are, interestingly, Lacan scholars, Jane Gallop and Shoshana Felman—have tried to write about the presence of the teacher as a body in the classroom, the presence of the teacher as someone who has a total effect on the development of the student, not just an intellectual effect but an effect on how that student perceives reality beyond the classroom.

*RS:* These are all things that weigh heavily on anyone who's taking seriously the history of the body of knowledge that is personified in the teacher. We were talking about how, in a way, our work brings our selves, our bodies into the classroom. The traditional notion of being in the classroom is a teacher behind a desk or standing at the front, immobilized. In a weird way that recalls the firm, immobilized body of knowledge as part of the immutability of truth itself. So what if one's clothing is soiled, if one's pants are not adjusted properly, or your shirt's sloppy. As long as the mind is still working elegantly and eloquently, that's what is supposed to be appreciated.

*bh:* Our romantic notion of the professor is so tied to a sense of the transitive mind, a mind that, in a sense, is always at odds with the body. I think part of why everyone in the

culture, and students in general, have a tendency to see professors as people who don't work is totally tied to that sense of the immobile body. Part of the class separation between what we do and what the majority of people in this culture can do (service, work, labor) is that they move their bodies. Liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body, work both with and through and against those limits: teachers may insist that it doesn't matter whether you stand behind the podium or the desk, but it does. I remember in my early teaching days that when I first tried to move out beyond the desk, I felt really nervous. I remember thinking, "This really is about power. I really do feel more 'in control' when I'm behind the podium or behind the desk than when I'm walking towards my students, standing close to them, maybe even touching them." Acknowledging that we are bodies in the classroom has been important for me, especially in my efforts to disrupt the notion of professor as omnipotent, all-knowing mind.

RS: When you leave the podium and walk around, suddenly the way you smell, the way you move become very apparent to your students. Also, you bring with you a certain kind of potential, though not guaranteed, for a certain kind of face-to-face relationship and respect for "what I say" and "what you say." Student and professor are looking at each other. And as we come physically close, suddenly what I have to say is not coming from behind this invisible line, this wall of demarcation that implies anything that from this side of the desk is gold, is truth, or that everything said out there is merely for my consideration, that the only possible way I can respond is by saying "good," "right," and so on. As people move around it becomes more evident that we *work* in the classroom. For some

teachers, and especially older faculty, there is a desire to enjoy the privilege of appearing not to work in the classroom. It's odd in and of itself, but it's particularly ironic since faculty members congregate outside the classroom and talk endlessly about how hard they're working.

bh: The arrangement of the body we are talking about de-emphasizes the reality that professors are in the classroom to offer something of our selves to the students. The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies. Significantly, those of us who are trying to critique biases in the classroom have been compelled to return to the body to speak about ourselves as subjects in history. We are all subjects in history. We must return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has been traditionally orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others. By recognizing subjectivity and the limits of identity, we disrupt that objectification that is so necessary in a culture of domination. That is why the efforts to acknowledge our subjectivity and that of our students has generated both a fierce critique and backlash. Even though Dinesh D'Souza and Allan Bloom present this critique as fundamentally a critique of ideas, it is also a critique of how those ideas get subverted, disrupted, taken apart in the classroom.

RS: If professors take seriously, respectfully, the student body, we are compelled to acknowledge that we are addressing folks who are part of history. And some of them are coming from histories that might be threatening to the established ways of knowing if acknowledged. This is especially the case for professors and teachers who, in the class-



room, come face to face with individuals they do not see in their own neighborhoods. For example, in the urban university settings, on my own campus, a good number of the professors don't live in New York City; some don't live in New York state. They live in Connecticut or New Jersey or they live on Long Island. Many of their communities are very isolated, not reflecting the racial mixture of people that are on their campus. I think that this is why so many of these professors see themselves as liberal, even as they maintain conservative positions in the classroom. This seems especially so with issues of race. Many of us want to act as though race doesn't matter, that we are here for what's interesting in the mind, that history doesn't matter even if you've been screwed over, or your parents were immigrants or the children of immigrants who have labored for forty years and have nothing to show for it. Recognition of that must be suspended; and the rationale for this erasure is that logic which says, "What we do here is science, what we do here is objective history."

bh: It is fascinating to see the ways erasure of the body connects to the erasure of class differences, and more importantly, the erasure of the role of university settings as sites for the reproduction of a privileged class of values, of elitism. All these issues are exposed when Western civilization and canon formation are challenged and rigorously interrogated. That's exactly what's threatening to conservative academics—the possibility that such critiques will dismantle the bourgeois idea of a "professor" and that, as a consequence, the sense of our significance and our role as teachers in the classroom would need to be fundamentally changed. While writing the essays in this book, I continuously thought about the fact that I know so many professors who are progressive in their politics, who have been willing to change their curriculum, but who in fact

have resolutely refused to change the nature of their pedagogical practice.

RS: Many of these professors have no awareness of how they conduct themselves in the classroom. For example, a teacher might introduce works by you, or by intellectuals from other groups underrepresented in the academy, yet they will work with these texts, work with the ideas they share, in ways that suggest there is ultimately no difference between this work and more conservative work emerging from folks privileged by class, race, or gender.

bh: It's also really important to acknowledge that professors may attempt to deconstruct traditional biases while sharing that information through body posture, tone, word choice, and so on that perpetuate those very hierarchies and biases they are critiquing.

RS: Exactly. That's the problem. On the one hand, you have the repetition of that whole tradition; and on the other hand, what does it do to the text being presented? It seems safer to present very radical texts as just so many other books to be added to the traditional lists—the already-existing canon.

bh: The example that comes to my mind is that of a white female English professor who is more than happy to include Toni Morrison on her syllabus but who does not want to discuss race when talking about the book. For she sees this as a much more threatening interrogation of what it means to be a professor than the call to change the curriculum. And she is right to see the call to change pedagogical strategies as risky. Certainly teachers who are trying to institutionalize progressive pedagogical practices risk being subjected to discrediting critiques.

RS: That's right. Professors who in fact do evoke the necessity of *tradition* could talk about it differently. Tradition should be such a wonderful word, a rich word. Yet it is

often used in a negative sense to repeat the tradition of the power of status quo. We could celebrate the tradition of teachers who have created a curriculum that is progressive. But such a tradition is never named or valued; even when reading radical texts there is a need to do so in a way that validates the scholarship that they've been raised on. They can't let go of it. Even when they read certain things in class, it has to be ultimately presented in a fashion that is not inconsistent with everything else that has come before it. But it devalues the significance, the impact, of a work by Toni Morrison, or by yourself, if it is not taught in a manner that goes against the grain. In philosophy classes today, work on race, ethnicity, and gender is used, but not in a subversive way. It is simply used to update the curriculum superficially. This clinging to the past is mandated by the profound belief in the legitimacy of all that has come before. Teachers who have these beliefs really have trouble experimenting and risking their bodies—the social order. They want the classroom to be the way it has always been.

bh: I want to reiterate that many teachers who do not have difficulty releasing old ideas, embracing new ways of thinking, may still be as resolutely attached to old ways of *practicing teaching* as their more conservative colleagues. That's a crucial issue. Even those of us who are experimenting with progressive pedagogical practices are afraid to change. Aware of myself as a subject in history, a member of a marginalized and oppressed group, victimized by institutionalized racism, sexism, and class elitism, I had tremendous fear that I would teach in a manner that would reinforce those hierarchies. Yet I had absolutely no model, no example of what it would mean to enter a classroom and teach in a different way. The urge to experiment with pedagogical practices may not be welcomed by

students who often expect us to teach in the manner they are accustomed to. My point is that it takes a fierce commitment, a will to struggle, to let our work as teachers reflect progressive pedagogies. There is a critique of progressive pedagogical practices that comes at us not just from the inside but from the outside as well. Bloom and D'Souza reached a mass audience and were able to give a distorted impression of progressive pedagogy. It's frightening to me that the mass media has not only offered the public a sense that there really has been some kind of revolution in education where conservative white men are just completely discredited when we know that very little has changed, that only a tiny group of professors advocate progressive pedagogy. We inhabit real institutions where very little seems to be changed, where there are very few changes in the curriculum, almost no paradigm shifts, and where knowledge and information continue to be presented in the conventionally accepted manner.

RS: As you were saying earlier, conservative thinkers have managed to make their argument outside the university and even persuade students that the quality of their education will diminish if changes are made. For example, I think many students confuse a lack of recognizable traditional formality with a lack of seriousness.

bh: What's really scary is that the negative critique of progressive pedagogy affects us—makes teachers afraid to change—to try new strategies. Many feminist professors, for example, begin their careers working to institutionalize more radical pedagogical practices, but when students did not appear to “respect their authority” they felt these practices were faulty, unreliable, and returned to traditional practices. Of course, they should have expected that students who have had a more conventional education would be threatened by and even resist teaching



practices which insist that students participate in education and not be passive consumers.

*RS:* That's very difficult to communicate to students because many of them are already convinced that they cannot respond to appeals that they be engaged in the classroom, because they've already been trained to view themselves as not the ones in authority, not the ones with legitimacy. To acknowledge student responsibility for the learning process is to place it where it's least legitimate in their own eyes. When we try to change the classroom so that there is a sense of mutual responsibility for learning, students get scared that you are now not the captain working with them, but that you are after all just another crew member—and not a reliable one at that.

*bh:* To educate for freedom, then, we have to challenge and change the way everyone thinks about pedagogical process. This is especially true for students. Before we try to engage them in a dialectical discussion of ideas that is mutual, we have to teach about process. I teach many white students and they hold diverse political stances. Yet they come into a class on African American women's literature expecting to hear no discussion of the politics of race, class, and gender. Often these students will complain, "Well I thought this was a literature class." What they're really saying to me is, "I thought this class was going to be taught like any other literature class I would take, only we would now substitute black female writers for white male writers." They accept the shift in the locus of representation but resist shifting ways they think about ideas. That is threatening. That's why the critique of multiculturalism seeks to shut the classroom down again—to halt this revolution in how we know what we know. It's as though many people know that the focus on difference has the potential to revolutionize the classroom and they

do not want the revolution to take place. There is a major backlash that seeks to delegitimize progressive pedagogy by saying, "This keeps us from having serious thoughts and serious education." That critique returns us to the issue surrounding teaching differently. How do we cope with how we are perceived by our colleagues? I've actually had colleagues say to me, "Students seem to really enjoy your class. What are you doing wrong?"

*RS:* Colleagues say to me, "Your students seem to be enjoying themselves, they seem to be laughing whenever I walk by, you seem to be having a good time." And the implication is that you're a good joke-teller, you're a good performer, but no serious teaching is happening. Pleasure in the classroom is feared. If there is laughter, a reciprocal exchange may be taking place. You're laughing, the students are laughing, and someone walks by, looks in and says, "OK, you're able to make them laugh. But so what? Anyone can entertain." They can take this attitude because the idea of reciprocity, of respect, is not ever assumed. It is not assumed that your ideas can be entertaining, moving. To prove your academic seriousness, students should be almost dead, quiet, asleep, not up, excited, and buzzing, lingering around the classroom.

*bh:* It is as though we are to imagine that knowledge is this rich creamy pudding students should consume and be nourished by, but not that the process of gestation should also be pleasurable. As a teacher working to develop liberatory pedagogy I am discouraged when I encounter students who believe if there's a different practice they can be less committed, less disciplined. I think our fear of losing students' respect has discouraged many professors from trying new teaching practices. Instead, some of us think, "I must return to the traditional way of doing it, otherwise I don't get the respect, and the students don't

get the education they deserve because they don't listen." When I was a student, I embraced any professor who wanted to create more progressive teaching practices. I still remember the excitement I felt when I took my first class where the teacher wanted to change how we sat, where we moved from sitting in rows to a circle where we could look at one another. That change forced us to recognize one another's presence. We couldn't sleepwalk our way to knowledge. Nowadays, there are times when students resist sitting in a circle. They devalue that shift, because fundamentally, they don't want to be participants.

*RS:* They see this practice as an empty gesture, not as an important pedagogical shift.

*bh:* They may think, "Why should I have to do this in your class, but not in all my other classes?" It's been amazing and discouraging to encounter the resisting student, who is not open to liberatory practice, even as I simultaneously see so many students craving liberatory practice.

*RS:* Even students who long for liberatory education, who appreciate it, find themselves resisting because they have to go to other classes where the class begins at a certain time, ends at a certain time, where all these regulations are in place as modes of expression of power, rather than what needs to be done to have some sense of possibility for sustained conversation. As we said earlier, we can intervene and change resistance by sharing our understanding of practice. I tell students not to confuse informality with a lack of seriousness, to respect the process. Because I teach in an informal way, students often feel like they can just get up, walk out, and come back. They are not comfortable. And I remind them that in their other classes where the teacher says if you miss one class you're out of the class, they are docile, willing to comply with arbitrary rules about behavior.

*bh:* I had an interesting experience last semester teaching at City College. I couldn't come to class one day and I had a substitute come, a person who was much more a traditional thinker, a traditional authoritarian, and the students conformed for the most part to those pedagogical practices. When I returned and I asked, "Well, what happened in class?" the students shared their perception that she had really humiliated a student, used her power forcibly to silence. "Well, what did you all say?" I asked. They admitted that they had sat there silently. These revelations made me see how deeply ingrained is the student perception that professors can be and should be dictators. To some extent, they saw me as "dictating" that they engage in liberatory practice, so they complied. Hence when another teacher entered the classroom and was more authoritarian they simply fell into line. But the triumph of liberatory pedagogy was that we had the space to interrogate their actions. They could look at themselves and say, "Why didn't we stand up for what we believe? Why didn't we maintain the value of our class? Do we see ourselves simply acting in complicity with her vision of liberatory practice, or are we committed to this practice ourselves?"

*RS:* Weren't their responses probably influenced by habit?

*bh:* It's very important to emphasize habit. It's so difficult to change existing structures because the habit of repression is the norm. Education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it's about a liberatory practice in the classroom. So many of us have critiqued the individual white male scholars who push critical pedagogy yet who do not alter their classroom practices, who assert race, class, and gender privilege without interrogating their conduct.

*RS:* In the way that they talk to students, call upon students, the control that they try to maintain, the comments they

make, they reinforce the status quo. This confuses students. It reinforces the impression that, despite what we read, despite what this guy says, if we really just look carefully at the way he's saying it, who he rewards, how he approaches people, there is no real difference. These actions undermine liberatory pedagogy.

*bh:* Once again, we are referring to a discussion of whether or not we subvert the classroom's politics of domination simply by using different material, or by having a different, more radical standpoint. Again and again, you and I are saying that different, more radical subject matter does not create a liberatory pedagogy, that a simple practice like including personal experience may be more constructively challenging than simply changing the curriculum. That is why there has been such critique of the place of experience—of confessional narrative—in the classroom. One of the ways you can be written off quickly as a professor by colleagues who are suspicious of progressive pedagogy is to allow your students, or yourself, to talk about experience; sharing personal narratives yet linking that knowledge with academic information really enhances our capacity to know.

*RS:* When one speaks from the perspective of one's immediate experiences, something's created in the classroom for students, sometimes for the very first time. Focusing on experience allows students to claim a knowledge base from which they can speak.

*bh:* One of the most misunderstood aspects of my writing on pedagogy is the emphasis on *voice*. Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one's experience. It is using that telling strategically—to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects. What many professors are frightened of is precisely that. I had a difficult moment last semester at City College in my seminar on Black

Women Writers. At the last class I talked with students about what they had brought individually to the classroom; but when they spoke, they showed me that our class had made them fear taking other classes. They confessed, "You've taught us how to think critically, to challenge, and to confront, and you've encouraged us to have a voice. But how can we go to other classrooms? No one wants us to have a voice in those classrooms!" This is the tragedy of education that does not promote freedom. And repressive education practices are more acceptable at state institutions than at places like Oberlin or Yale. In the privileged liberal arts colleges, it is acceptable for professors to respect the "voice" of any student who wants to make a point. Many students in those institutions feel they are entitled—that their voices deserve to be heard. But students in public institutions, mostly from working-class backgrounds, come to college assuming that professors see them as having nothing of value to say, no valuable contribution to make to a dialectical exchange of ideas.

*RS:* Sometimes professors may even act as though personal recognition is important, but they do so in a superficial way. Professors, even those who view themselves as liberal, may think that it's good for students to speak, only to proceed in a manner that devalues what the students say.

*bh:* We're willing to hear Suzie speak even as we then immediately turn away from her words, erasing them. This undermines a pedagogy that seeks constantly to affirm the value of student voices. It suggests a democratic process by which we erase words, and their capacity to influence and affirm. With that erasure Suzie is not able to see herself as a speaking subject worthy of voice. I don't mean only in terms of how she names her personal experience, but how she interrogates both the experiences of others, and how she responds to knowledge presented.

RS: In many classes this comes full circle. In the end it's the teacher's voice that everyone knew all along was the only one to listen to. And now that we've gone around in a circle—an exaggerated thing—we all know that the democratic voice, an expression of that voice, leads to a rather conservative conclusion. Even though students are speaking they don't really know how to listen to other students.

bh: In regards to pedagogical practices we must intervene to alter the existing pedagogical structure and to teach students *how to listen, how to hear one another*.

RS: So one of the responsibilities of the teacher is to help create an environment where students learn that, in addition to speaking, it is important to listen respectfully to others. This doesn't mean we listen uncritically or that classrooms can be open so that anything someone else says is taken as true, but it means really taking seriously what someone says. In principle, the classroom ought to be a place where things are said seriously—not without pleasure, not without joy—but seriously, and for serious consideration. I notice many students have difficulty taking seriously what they themselves have to say because they are convinced that the only person who says anything of note is the teacher. Even if another student does say something that the teacher says is good, helpful, smart, whatever, it's only through the act of the teacher's validating that the other students take note. If the teacher doesn't seem to indicate that this is something worth noting, few students will. I see it as a fundamental responsibility of the teacher to show by example the ability to listen to others seriously. Our focus on student voice raises a whole range of questions about silencing. At what point does one say what someone else is saying ought not to be pursued in the classroom?

bh: One of the reasons I appreciate people linking the personal to the academic is that I think that the more students recognize their own uniqueness and particularity, the more they listen. So, one of my teaching strategies is to redirect their attention away from my voice to one another's voices. I often find that this happens most quickly when students share experiences in conjunction with academic subject matter, because then people remember each other.

Earlier I raised the dilemma that professors who cannot communicate well cannot teach students how to communicate. Many professors who are critical of the inclusion of confessional narrative in the classroom or of digressive discussions, where students are doing a lot of the talking, are critical because they lack the skill needed to facilitate dialogue. Once the space for dialogue is open in the classroom, that moment must be orchestrated so that you don't get bogged down with people who just like to hear themselves talk, or with people who are unable to relate experience to the academic subject matter. At times I need to interrupt students and say, "That's interesting, but how does that relate to the novel we're reading?"

RS: Many people, both students and professors, believe that when they hear people like ourselves talking about encouraging a student's opinion in class we're merely endorsing the stereotypical rap session: everyone says anything they want; there's no real direction or purpose to the class other than making each other feel good; that anything can be said. Yet one can be critical and be respectful at the same time. One can interrupt someone, and still have a serious, respectful dialogue. All too often it is assumed that if you "give students the freedom"—and it's a mistake to think we're talking about giving students

freedom rather than seeing it is a project that teachers and students are working on together—there will be chaos, that no serious discussion will ensue.

bh: That's the difference education as the practice of freedom makes. The bottom-line assumption has to be that everyone in the classroom is able to act responsibly. That has to be the starting point—that we are able to act responsibly together to create a learning environment. All too often we have been trained as professors to assume students are not capable of acting responsibly, that if we don't exert control over them, then there's just going to be mayhem.

RS: Or excess. There is such a fear of letting go in the classroom, of taking risks. When professors let go it is not only the student voice that must speak freely but also the professor's voice. Teachers need to practice freedom, to speak, just as much as students do.

bh: Absolutely. That's a point I keep making in my pedagogy essays over and over again. In much feminist scholarship criticizing critical pedagogy, there is an attack on the notion of the classroom as a space where students are empowered. Yet the classroom should be a space where we're all in power in different ways. That means we professors should be empowered by our interactions with students. In my books I try to show how much my work is influenced by what students say in the classroom, what they do, what they express to me. Along with them I grow intellectually, developing sharper understandings of how to share knowledge and what to do in my participatory role with students. This is one of the primary differences between education as a practice of freedom and the conservative banking system which encourages professors to believe deep down in the core of their being that they have nothing to learn from their students.

RS: And that goes back to your emphasis on engaged pedagogy, on commitment. Intellectuals, even radical intellectuals, have to be careful not to reinscribe the very modes of domination in our practice with students. Using liberatory discourse is not enough if we ultimately fall back on the banking system.

bh: When I enter the classroom at the beginning of the semester the weight is on me to establish that our purpose is to be, for however brief a time, a community of learners *together*. It positions me as a learner. But I'm also not suggesting that I don't have more power. And I'm not trying to say we're all equal here. I'm trying to say that we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context.

RS: That's right. That returns us to the issue of respect. Sure, it's bad faith to pretend that we're all the same because the teacher's the one who ultimately is going to grade. In traditional terms that *is* the source of power, and judging is something we all do as students and as teachers. That's not really the source of power in the successful classroom. The power of the liberatory classroom is in fact the power of the learning process, the work we do to establish a community.

bh: Another difficulty I had to work through early on as a professor was evaluating whether or not our experience in the classroom had been rewarding. In the classes I teach, students are often presented with new paradigms and are being asked to shift their ways of thinking to consider new perspectives. In the past I have often felt that this type of learning process is very hard; it's painful and troubling. It may be six months or a year, even two years later, that they realize the importance of what they have learned. That was really hard for me, because I think part of what the banking system does for professors is create



the system where we want to feel that by the end of the semester every student will be sitting there filling out their evaluations testifying that I'm a "good teacher." It's all about feeling good, feeling good about me, and feeling good about the class. But in reconceptualizing engaged pedagogy I had to realize that our purpose here isn't really to feel good. Maybe we enjoy certain classes, but it will usually be difficult. We have to learn how to appreciate difficulty, too, as a stage in intellectual development. Or accept that that cozy, good feeling may at times block the possibility of giving students space to feel that there is integrity to be found in grappling with difficult material, whether that material comes from confessional narratives, books, or discussions.

RS: Genuinely radical critical teachers are conscious of this even though their peers and some students don't fully appreciate it. Sometimes it's important to remind students that joy can be present *along with hard work*. Not every moment in the classroom will necessarily be one that brings you immediate pleasure, but that doesn't preclude the possibility of joy. Nor does it deny the reality that learning can be painful. And sometimes it's necessary to remind students and colleagues that pain and painful situations don't necessarily translate into harm. We make that very fundamental mistake all the time. Not all pain is harm, and not all pleasure is good. Many colleagues walk by a class that's engaged and see students working, see them either in tears, or smiling and laughing, and assume it's mere emotion.

bh: Or if it's emotional that it's a kind of group therapy. Few professors talk about the place of emotions in the classroom. In the introductory chapter of this book I talk about my longing that the classroom be an exciting place. If we are all emotionally shut down, how can there

be any excitement about ideas? When we bring our passion to the classroom our collective passions come together, and there is often an emotional response, one that can overwhelm. The restrictive, repressive classroom ritual insists that emotional responses have no place. Whenever emotional responses erupt, many of us believe our academic purpose has been diminished. To me this is really a distorted notion of intellectual practice, since the underlying assumption is that to be truly intellectual we must be cut off from our emotions.

RS: Or, as you pointed out, it's another practice of denial, wherein the full body and soul of a person is not allowed in the classroom.

bh: If we focus not just on whether the emotions produce pleasure or pain, but on how they keep us aware or alert, we are reminded that they enhance classrooms. There are times when I walk into my class and the students seem absolutely bored out of their minds. And I say to them, "What's up? Everybody seems to be really bored today. There seems to be a lack of energy. What should we do? What can we do?" I might say, "Clearly the direction we're moving in doesn't seem to be awakening your senses, your passions right now." My intent is to engage them more fully. Often students want to deny that they are collectively bored. They want to please me. Or they don't want to be critical. At such times I must stress that, "I'm not taking this personally. It's not just my job to make this class work. It's everyone's responsibility." They might reply, "Well it's exam time," or "It's this kind of time," or "It's the beginning of spring," or "We just don't want to be sitting here." And then I try to say, "Well, then, what can we do? How can we approach our subject to make it more interesting?" One of the most intense aspects of liberatory pedagogical practice is the challenge on the part

of the professor to change the set agenda. We all learn to make lesson plans, and want to stick to them. When I began teaching, I would feel panic, a sense of crisis, if there was a deviation from my set agenda. I think the crisis we all feel about changing agendas is the fear that we will not cover enough material. And in thinking this through I have to undermine my own "I"; maybe the material I most want them to know on a given day is not necessarily what learning is about. Professors can dish out all the right material, but if people are not in a mind to receive it, they leave classrooms empty of that information, even though we may feel we've really done our jobs.

RS: To focus on covering material precisely is one way to slip back into a banking system. That often happens when teachers ignore the mood of the class, the mood of the season, even the mood of the building. The simple act of recognizing a mood and asking "What's this about?" can awaken an exciting learning process.

bh: Right. And how we work with that mood or how we cope if we can't work with it.

RS: Right. I remember a very poignant moment for me happened during one class. There had been several disruptions that happened because of problems with scheduling; classes were ending and beginning at odd times. Students were forced to leave one class, go to another. This disruption involved about fifty people. At one point there was a steady stream of people coming into the class, and there were jets flying over the Queens College campus. I looked up and said, "Enough, today. This isn't going to happen unless you guys want to go somewhere else. I can't do anything more. It's not working for me; I'm failing." I asked whether anyone in the class would want to take over, to lead the discussion, but everyone agreed it wasn't working out. Afterwards, people ran after

me asking, "Are you upset? Are you mad at us?" I said, "Not at all; this was like a bad ballgame. You know, it's twelve-nothing in the first inning, and it's raining. Let's call it a day."

bh: That brings us back to grades. Many professors are afraid of allowing nondirected thought in the classroom for fear that deviation from a set agenda will interfere with the grading process. A more flexible grading process must go hand in hand with a transformed classroom. Standards must always be high. Excellence must be valued, but standards cannot be absolute and fixed.

RS: In most of the courses I teach, I take the position that I am observing. I am there to observe and evaluate the work that's being done.

bh: When you acknowledge that we are observers, it means that we are workers in the classroom. To do that work well we can't be simply standing in front of the class reading. If I'm to know whether a student is participating I have to be listening, I have to be recording, and I have to be thinking beyond that moment. I want them to think, "What I'm here for is to work with material, and to work with it the best way that I can. And in doing that I don't have to be fearful about my grade, because if I am working the best I can with this material, I know it's going to be reflected in my grade." I try to communicate that the grade is something they can control by their labor in the classroom.

RS: I think that's a really important point. Many students feel they could never presume to evaluate their own work positively. Someone else will decide how hard or how well they are working. And so there is already a devaluation of their own effort. Our task is to empower students so that they have the skills to assess their academic growth properly.

bh: The obsession with good grades has so much to do with fear of failure. Progressive teaching tries to eradicate that

fear, both in students and in professors. There are moments when I worry that I am not being a “good” teacher, and then I find myself struggling to break with a good/bad binary. It’s more useful for me to think of myself as a progressive teacher who’s willing to own both my successes and failures in the classroom.

RS: We often speak of the “good” teacher when we really mean a professor who is engaged fully, deeply with the *art* of teaching.

bh: That makes me think immediately of engaged Buddhism, which can be juxtaposed with more orthodox Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism emphasizes participation and involvement, particularly involvement with a world beyond yourself. “Engaged” is a great way to talk about liberatory classroom practice. It invites us always to be in the present, to remember that the classroom is never the same. Traditional ways of thinking about the classroom stress the opposite paradigm—that the classroom is always the same even when students are different. Sitting around with colleagues at the beginning of the school year, they often complain about this sameness, as though the classroom is inherently a static place. To me, the engaged classroom is always changing. Yet this notion of engagement threatens the institutionalized practices of domination. When the classroom is truly engaged, it’s dynamic. It’s fluid. It’s *always* changing. Last semester, I had a class where when I finished I was walking on air. It had been a *great* class. The students left realizing that they didn’t have to think like me, that I wasn’t there to reproduce myself. They left with a sense of engagement, with a sense of themselves as critical thinkers, excited about intellectual activity. The semester before that, I had this class that I just hated. I hated it so bad I didn’t want to get up in the morning and go to it. I couldn’t even sleep at night,

because I hated it so much I feared that I would sleep through it. And it was an 8:00 A.M. class. It didn’t work. One of the things that fascinated me about that experience is that we failed to create a learning community in the classroom. That did not mean that individual students didn’t learn a great deal, but in terms of creating a communal context for learning, it was a failure. That failure was heartbreaking for me. It was hard to accept that I was not able to control the direction our classroom was moving in. I would think, “What can I do? And what could I have done?” And I kept reminding myself that I couldn’t do it alone, that forty other people were also in there.

RS: Much of what we have been saying speaks to our sense of time and temporality in the classroom. When new semesters begin I’m very aware that this is one of the most important moments. No matter that it’s a ritual for students—there is also a genuine excitement. At the very beginning of each semester I try to use that excitement to deepen and enrich the classroom experience. I want to tap into that excitement about learning to sustain it, to keep it moving throughout the semester. Engaged teachers know that even in the worst circumstances, people tend to learn. People do tend to learn, but we want more than just learning; it’s sort of like saying even under the worst circumstances, people survive; we’re not interested in simply surviving here.

bh: Absolutely. That’s why “education as the practice of freedom” is a phrase that has always wowed me. Students leave any classroom with information whether the pedagogy has been engaging or not. I remember a class that I took from a professor who was a serious alcoholic. He was a tragic figure, who often came late to the classroom and rambled on, but there was still something to be had from the material. But it was a horrible experience. We became

complicit in his substance abuse each class when we didn't see it. This example makes me think again about ways we see the body, the "self" of the professor. Even though he was stumbling around drunk, giving the same lecture he gave last week, we didn't tell him because we didn't want to disrupt his authority, his image of himself. We didn't break through that denial: we were simply complicit.

RS: Complicity often happens because professors and students alike are afraid to challenge, because that would mean more work. Engaged pedagogy is physically exhausting!

bh: And that's partly about numbers. Even the best, most engaged classroom can fail under the weight of too many people. That's really been a problem for me in my teaching career. As I've become more and more committed to liberatory pedagogical practices, my classrooms have become just too large. So those practices are undermined by sheer numbers. Rebelling against that has meant insisting on limits to classroom size. Overcrowded classes are like overcrowded buildings—the structure can collapse.

RS: Taking up your metaphor of a building, let's say you have someone in the building who's in charge of maintaining it. The person's a great worker and does everything that should be done, meticulously and responsibly. But the owner of the building is simply overcrowding the building to a point where every system in the building—from the sewers to toilets, to the garbage, everything—is just overburdened. This person eventually will be exhausted; and even though an incredible job is being done, the result will be a building that still looks dirty, that looks ill-kept, etc. In terms of the institution, we have to realize that if we are working on ourselves to become more fully engaged, there's only so much that we can do. Ultimately, the institution will exhaust us simply because there is no sustained institutional support for liberatory pedagogical practices.

bh: It's been really troubling to me. The more the engaged classroom becomes overcrowded, the more it is in danger of being a spectacle, a place of entertainment. When that happens, the potentially transformative power of that classroom is undermined, and my commitment to teaching is undermined.

RS: We have to resist being turned into spectacles. That means resisting "star" status, resisting playing the role of performer. One of the disadvantages, I'd say, to your own celebrity might be the attraction of certain people to the classroom to watch, rather than to be engaged. That's a problem in our culture with celebrity itself, but one can refuse to be simply watched.

bh: When we have star status, iconic status as professors, people stop coming to classes solely because they desire participatory education. Some come to see bell hooks perform. Students who come for the "star" that they take to be bell hooks often engage in a sort of self censorship because they want to please me. Or they come to confront me. Ideally, students who want to be "devotees" would come to be transformed by active participation. But the project of creating a learning community as a teacher is difficult enough without this added complication! The classroom is not for stars; it's a place for learning. For me, star status can be diffused by my willingness to inhabit locations where that status does not exist. Let's talk about ways we would alter our profession. I think it would enhance our teaching practices if professors didn't always teach at the same type of institution. Even though I have a radical commitment to teaching, I was very frightened about changing my teaching location. I feared that after teaching in wealthy private schools for so long, and teaching students who've had privileged educational support structures before coming into college, I wouldn't be able

to work as an engaged teacher in a different kind of setting. Coming to teach at City College, a public institution with many students from nonprivileged backgrounds, was and is a constant challenge. In the beginning I felt afraid. That fear reminded me of the need to be able to shift my thinking, my sense of what I do as a professor. That sense can be altered by context.

Fixed notions about teaching as a process are continually challenged in a learning context where students are really diverse, where they do not share the same assumptions about learning. Last semester at City College, I had fifteen black students in my literature class. Only one of them was African American. The others were Afro-Caribbean from many diverse locations. So I had to change certain assumptions that I might have had about black experience. The fact that most of these students had a sense of a home outside the United States that they could return to—cultures, other places of origin—really informed their way of reading texts. A factory model of educational process would not have encouraged a shift in teaching practices.

RS: We were talking about the disadvantages of celebrity. But one of the benefits of having a certain kind of recognition, celebrity, within your profession is that you can move from institution to institution whereas most professors are stuck.

bh: That's why I was suggesting that it would be exciting to create a structure for education where *everybody* could move. I see the ability of professors to move as essential to maintaining excitement about their work.

RS: Oh, absolutely. Most people aren't celebrities. Most of us teach in virtual obscurity. But there are still ways we can move. We simply have to work at it differently. For example, if you are a tenured professor, you can take a leave of

absence, and while you may not make the same money, you could choose different work, different settings.

bh: Other kinds of work in diverse settings might well enhance our capacity to teach. And if I were refashioning our educational system, that would be possible.

RS: Even within the context of a university setting, a person—a teacher, a professor—can say, "What else can I do?" A place like Queens, where I teach, a community of 17,000 people, that's bigger than a lot of towns in America.

bh: Twice the size of Oberlin!

RS: It's 17,000 people, from diverse locations, speaking sixty-six languages. That's a lot of people living different lives. Yet many professors say, "Well, if I were able to do something else I might do it." It raises the question of what it means to be in service. There are other ways in which teachers can be working outside the classroom, yet within the university setting: get a course release, or maybe a total course reduction, and do different programs. Universities have to start recognizing that there's more to the education of a student than merely classroom time.

Most of our students work, and work twenty to forty hours a week. They're not just getting supplementary income for clothing or a trip. So the classroom is just one time frame and one location for teachers to be engaged with students. But there's the whole campus, and there's the community beyond the campus that these students belong to. A teacher could do many different things, be engaged in different ways.

bh: Absolutely. I think of the support groups I've created for students outside the classroom.

RS: There are so many ways we can help establish a learning community. For example, it was very awkward at Queens around the time of the Bensonhurst and Howard Beach incidents, both cases where African Americans were killed



by whites. We have students at Queens from Howard Beach and Bensonhurst. It seemed appropriate that some dialogue should begin. What happened was a bunch of students, some of whom were not in my classes but were friends of people in my classes, sat around a cafeteria table and started a discussion. It just grew to a point where we had a yearlong roundtable about race at Queens College; it was about violence, it was about respect, it was about issues of how men treat women—all the issues that were important. I think this helped create learning communities in the classroom in a way that was different than if this dialogue had emerged from a traditional institutional framework. I didn't get a course release for doing this. The students didn't originally get any recognition from the institution. I did ask my department, "Can we have an Independent Study?" And we called it "Philosophy of Race" and that was the Independent Study, so the first semester was no grade, no nothing; the second semester was done very much as the first semester, but this time the students were getting institutional recognition for their thoughtfulness about this issue. And this wasn't just another "classroom moved to the cafeteria"! I'm not talking about the lazy person's notion of what it means to transgress; you know, "It's a nice day. Let's go outside." There's something else going on when we create spaces outside the classroom for serious discussions. So a teacher need not be a celebrity or a superstar to do different things right where they work. There's more to their work than just being in the classroom, and every teacher will tell you, "Yes, grading, going to faculty meetings," and so on. But there *are* other things.

bh: I wish institutions would understand that teachers need time away from teaching, and that time away from teaching is not always a year sabbatical where you're busting

your ass to write a book, but that time away from teaching might be two years, or three. With the kind of job crisis we're in, and I think if somebody can afford to take a leave without pay for two years or three years, and somebody else can have that job who doesn't have a job—why isn't that encouraged? Many professors are not interested in engaged pedagogy because they fear "burn-out." I've been teaching for almost twenty years and I am right now in my first year leave—an unpaid leave—but it's my first real time off. And I feel the lack of time off has been damaging to my teaching. There has to be a recognition of the way the failing economy is taking jobs. There has to be more of an emphasis on job-sharing and job-switching in the interest of creating an environment where engaged teaching can be sustained.

RS: This idea frightens a lot of teachers. They're worried it will lead to more work, and not different work, and not more excitement and more engagement for them. Engaged teachers are conscious of their own individual lives but also of their involvement with others, but I think traditional teachers take that same sort of recognition and turn it into a right to privacy, so that once tenure is granted there's a real withdrawal. Tenure affords many of us the opportunity to hide.

bh: Which takes us back, finally, to self-actualization. If professors are wounded, damaged individuals, people who are not self-actualized, then they will seek asylum in the academy rather than seek to make the academy a place of challenge, dialectical interchange, and growth.

RS: This is one of the tragedies in education today. We have a lot of people who don't recognize that *being a teacher* is *being with people*.