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## The Ambivalence of Reflection: Critical Pedagogies, Identity, and the Writing Teacher

I teach writing at a state university. Our spring semester ends in mid-May. By Memorial Day weekend I've turned in my grades, returned final papers, and begun planning for my fall courses. But I usually won't read the student evaluations until much later. I always dread reading them, even though I know most of them will be positive and some even flattering, and even though I will carefully consider what my students believed was useful about the course and what wasn't, what should be changed and what shouldn't. This, I assume, is part of what good teachers do in their efforts to improve their teaching; it's part of what many educators have come to call *reflective practice*. Nevertheless, I hate it.

To explain why is to explore an ambivalence that attends reflective practice: a troubling space between doubt and committed action that writing teachers often inhabit, a space of both possibility and paralysis that we rarely acknowledge directly in our discussions about teaching writing. Turning an unflinching critical eye toward one's own teaching is often characterized as essential to constructing what bell hooks calls an "engaged pedagogy" (*Teaching to Transgress*), and indeed experienced teachers of all ideological stripes understand the usefulness of genuine self-critique. But self-critique—and reflective teaching in general—is more difficult than it may seem, often accompanied by an acute form of self-doubt that leads me to believe that many of us may be more ambivalent about our pedagogies than we let on. I think it's worth asking why, especially since

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“critical pedagogy” seems now to occupy an accepted place in mainstream composition scholarship (notwithstanding the complaints of scholars like Maxine Hairston and Jeff Smith).

Although the literature on critical pedagogy pays ample attention to the necessity of self-critique on the part of the teacher and to the difficulties that can accompany the enactment of critical pedagogies, the focus of such discussion is often on the resistance to critical teaching on the part of students and on how teachers can understand and address this resistance. When the role of the teacher is addressed, it is often examined critically in an attempt to wrestle with the teacher’s complicity, as Richard Miller calls it, in the very economic and political system that a critical pedagogy is intended to critique and ultimately reform. For instance, in her well-known examination of what she terms the myths of critical pedagogy, Elizabeth Ellsworth questions the common assumption among critical pedagogues of “the presence of or potential for an emancipated teacher” (307). Her description of her own experiences to enact a critical pedagogy reveals that “no teacher is free of these learned and internalized oppressions” of “racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism” (307–08). Ultimately, Ellsworth addresses this problem by engaging in a kind of ongoing self-critique of her position as teacher: “I am trying to unsettle received definitions of pedagogy by multiplying the ways in which I am able to act on and in the university both as the Inappropriate/d Other and as the privileged speaking/making subject trying to unlearn that privilege” (323).

This is difficult terrain indeed, and we traverse it, often uncertainly, as Ellsworth demonstrates, in the day-to-day interactions we have with students and in routine activities like reviewing student evaluations. These accounts by Ellsworth and Miller and others (e.g. Fox) suggest that there is a kind of unavoidable doubt that attends such activity. Yet rarely do we seem to examine the conflicted role of the teacher of writing and reading as encompassing this serious and legitimate doubt, as a function to some extent of the huge uncertainty that we inevitably must have about what we do. To explore that doubt, I think, may provide insight into what we do—and what we can do—as teachers of writing.

What I am calling “reflective teaching” has become an important concept in the past decade or so among teacher-educators and specifically among literacy educators, especially those interested in improving classroom practice in ways that are consistent with a progressive agenda. Donald Schön popularized the concept in the early 1980s with his book *The Reflective Practitioner*, and his ideas have informed many literacy educators involved in teacher training (such as John Mayher; see *Uncommon Sense*) as well as compositionists concerned about pedagogy generally. More recently, Kathleen Yancey has focused attention on how to help student writers

acquire a reflective stance on their own writing; her purpose in this effort is “to ask students to participate with us, not as objects of our study, but as *agents of their own learning*, in a process that is product that is becoming known, quite simply, as *reflection*” (5). Such an approach seems consistent with what I see as a trend in composition studies to encourage students to become more critical readers and writers as part of our more general embrace of *critique* as a central intellectual activity.

But for teachers, *reflection* involves something more. As Schön explains in the preface to his subsequent book, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, he is arguing “for a new epistemology of practice, one that would stand the question of professional knowledge on its head by taking as its point of departure the competence and artistry already embedded in skillful practice—especially, the reflection-in-action (the ‘thinking what they are doing while they are doing it’) that practitioners sometimes bring to situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict” (xi). And here is where Schön’s appeal to many teachers of writing emerges, since it is precisely those “situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict” that so interest advocates of critical pedagogies in composition studies. Arguments for such pedagogies, energized by scholars like Ira Shor and Tom Fox, have been shaping professional discussions in composition studies for some time, and although many of these scholars do not acknowledge a debt to Schön directly, their calls for extended self-critique on the part of writing teachers—a critique usually focused on the inherently political nature of their teaching—is akin to Schön’s insistence that effective teachers must be continually self-reflective about how they teach. In short, thinking hard about what we do in our classrooms—engaging in “reflective practice”—is characterized as an essential part of being an effective writing teacher.

One theme that emerges from these various literatures on reflective practice and critical pedagogy is the notion that reflective teaching is *supposed* to be troubling. Scholars like bell hooks and Paulo Freire, whose concern with promoting a kind of transformative teaching has deeply influenced compositionists, suggest that careful, critical reflection on our teaching should at times be unsettling, uncomfortable, even painful. This discomfort is part of the effort to attain a more complex understanding of our practice and how it affects—how it empowers or disempowers—our students. From this perspective, self-doubt can be seen as part of the discomfort that comes with adopting transformative pedagogies. But given the enormous difficulties that teaching so often involves, such self-doubt can be debilitating. Teachers who strive to be sensitive about the effects of their pedagogies on students of diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and aware of the power relations between them and their students can find themselves overwhelmed by the burden of such a peda-

gological agenda; indeed, they can be overwhelmed in ways that go beyond the relatively minor discomfort of reading critical student evaluations. How, for example, does one “unlearn that privilege,” as Ellsworth puts it, that comes with being a teacher? As one student teacher of mine explained her decision to abandon a career in education after only one semester of teaching, “I really want to teach, but it’s just too much.”

We rarely talk in our professional discussions about this sort of doubt on the part of individual writing teachers struggling to be sensitive, empowering teachers. Yet my work with new teachers of writing and my own experience as a writing teacher suggest that such doubt is common and, as my student teacher’s comment indicates, not always productive. Indeed, published accounts of efforts to employ critical approaches to teaching writing indicate that things rarely go as smoothly as we’d like.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, if a genuinely reflective practice is to lead to an “engaged pedagogy” which “empowers” students, then we ought to acknowledge and understand the discomfort and self-doubt on the part of the teacher that seem inevitably to attend our efforts to construct such a pedagogy. What is the source of this self-doubt? How does it function in our work with students? Moreover, we ought to consider what it means for an individual teacher to experience the kind of doubt that eventually pushed my student teacher out of the classroom. It is one thing to assert that critical teaching can and even should be uncomfortable, but how do we understand and confront this discomfort, this doubt, in our individual efforts to engage in a reflective practice when we know that a sense of confidence is also crucial to effective teaching?

### **Why Is It that I Hate Reading Student Evaluations at the End of Each Semester? Should I?**

One way to begin to address such questions that emerges from the literature on critical pedagogy is to acknowledge that change itself is uncomfortable. If we try to change practices that grow out of assumptions, conventions, and institutional structures to which we have become accustomed, then we are inevitably unsettled and feel a tendency to retreat to the familiar. hooks concedes that “even those of us who are experimenting with progressive pedagogical practices are afraid to change” (142). She goes on to point out that, as educators, “we inhabit real institutions where very little seems to be changed, where there are very few changes in the curriculum, and where knowledge and information continue to be presented in the conventionally accepted manner,” all of which make any pedagogical change difficult and uncomfortable. No doubt this is true. But I think there’s more to it than that. To change our pedagogy means to

change the way we relate to our students, and that means that we need to take a hard look at our relationships with students. Much is made of the teacher-student relationship, and rightly so. Both Freire and hooks speak of the imbalance in the traditional teacher-student relationship and argue that we must strive for greater equality in that relationship; they speak of “decentering authority” in the classroom. But this decentering is more than just a matter of questioning our institutional authority or altering classroom procedures; it amounts to rethinking the very *identity* of the teacher, a project that critical teachers like Ellsworth have taken up only obliquely and that few others seem to have addressed directly. And I think this is much more easily said than done.

Two years ago, for a variety of personal and professional reasons, I left a position at Purdue University to join the faculty at the State University of New York at Albany. At Purdue, I employed what I considered to be a critical approach to teaching writing intended to challenge my undergraduates, almost all of whom were English education majors, to rethink what it means to write—and to teach writing—in a complex and rapidly changing world. Despite some resistance of the kind often described in the literature on critical pedagogy,<sup>2</sup> my students responded positively to my courses. I won teaching awards in each of the four years I was there and enjoyed consistently positive student evaluations of my teaching. At one ceremony at which I received an award from a student honors society, one of my students told the audience that “above all, Professor Yagelski taught us to think.” I was pleased with my teaching and, not incidentally, with myself.

In my first semester at SUNY-Albany, I taught a graduate course in composition theory in which, from the very start, I found myself questioned by my students in ways I had never experienced. There were many differences between the contexts within which I taught at these two universities, of course, and I don’t mean to oversimplify matters by making a one-to-one comparison. For one thing, my students at Purdue University were primarily undergraduates, whereas at SUNY-Albany I was dealing more extensively with graduate students. But in general, my new students were much more willing to challenge my authority as teacher than were my students at Purdue—which I considered to be a good thing, an indication of my new students’ willingness to engage tough issues, to question those defined institutionally as their mentors. But serious difficulties emerged when I was challenged by one of the women in the class to address what she considered to be a latent sexism in the way the class discussions played out.

Only a month into the semester, the course became a sometimes tense forum on issues of gender and authority in the classroom and, I felt, on my teaching. The student, Ann, had charged in a paper shared with the entire class that, despite being the overwhelming majority in the class (11 of 15),

the women were mostly silent and at best deferential during class discussions. Moreover, she accused me of dismissing her concerns about this problem. Initially, I was angered by such a charge, since I shared her concerns about the apparent silence of the women in the class. But unlike Ann, I attributed this silence to a variety of factors in addition to gender: age, educational status, and so on. For instance, several of the students were middle-aged teachers who were squeezing classes into their already squeezed schedules and who confessed to being intimidated by their younger, theoretically sophisticated classmates. Moreover, only a few of the students were full-time doctoral students; many were part-time graduate students, and some were fulfilling requirements for a teacher certification program. Obviously, there were among the students a variety of different, sometimes conflicting agendas for the course. Indeed, several women in the class, all of whom were part-time graduate students, approached me privately around mid-semester to indicate that they did not think the problem was exclusively a function of gender; they expressed concern that they were being “silenced” by some of their classmates. Shortly thereafter, we had some discussion about the problem at the beginning of one of our weekly class meetings. Various viewpoints were voiced. Nevertheless, the “problem” remained.

A split emerged among the students. Some, mostly the full-time PhD students, supported this open critique of the course that Ann initiated, while others, mostly part-time grad students and those seeking teacher certification, were upset that the course no longer seemed to be about composition theory. The tensions remained high through the end of the semester, even after I changed the final assignment to a collaborative project as part of my attempt to address this split. My purpose was to enable the students to use the final project as a way to examine the gender issues that had emerged in the class. But although most of the students participated in the project (some opted to do the more conventional seminar paper), few were satisfied with it and none, as best I could tell, believed it really addressed the problems that had shaped the class. Ultimately, I felt my efforts to address these important matters in a way that was both fair and productive failed, and I began to look hard at what happened in the class in order to explain that failure. I reread student comments, talked to members of the class, sought insight from colleagues. I reflected. And I began to conclude that the “problem,” complicated though it was, ultimately was me. In a paper I presented at CCCC in 1997, I summed up what I thought I had learned from the experience:

Becoming an academic in the field of composition has, despite my best intentions, inexorably increased the distance between me and my students... And

in this sense, the story of that course at SUNY-Albany is the story of what that distance can mean...My effort in the fall of 1995 was not about my students' lives; it was about preserving my academic field and my own identity as an academic.

Now, this kind of revelation has become almost commonplace in professional discussions of critical pedagogy. It is consistent with the acknowledgment, so often emphasized in such discussions, of the ways in which we, as writing teachers, are implicated in the institutional power structures within which we work. John Clifford articulates the problem in what has become a familiar way:

The discursive conflicts in composition classrooms...derive their form and function from the specific conditions of existence that govern class conflicts beyond the educational institution. The ideologies of the state apparatuses we find enmeshed in our discourse are internalized versions of those ongoing confrontations between the dominant and the other. As instructors we can never fully transcend these struggles or our role in them as Subjects of hegemony. We must learn to live with this contradiction if we work in institutions. We are Subjects who do the sorting work of an unequal society. And although we may also hope to be oppositional agents, we cannot fully escape the institutional interpellation. (50)

Although I generally accept Clifford's analysis here, what strikes me is the way in which this analysis focuses on the institutional context of teaching rather than on the teacher, as if the teacher—the teaching “subject,” in postmodern terms—is merely a function of that context. (To an extent, Ellsworth's characterization of the teacher shares this focus.) In a sense, such a focus is as much an oversimplification of the situation as if I had explained matters by describing myself as a “bad” teacher. Clearly, institutionally defined power relations played a role in what happened in my composition theory class in complex ways.

It's crucial, however, to confront that what happened in that class—what happens in every writing class—is in large part a function of the teacher's identity as both teacher and students construct it.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, an awareness of my institutionally defined authority, while important, does not necessarily help me confront the personal disappointment and self-doubt I felt at the end of that semester. In re-examining that semester, I have often felt very much as my former student teacher must have felt when she told me, “I really want to teach, but it's just too much.” At some point, my experiences in that course—and similar experiences with undergraduates in my writing courses—and my efforts to understand them were not about “institutional

interpellation” but about my own sense of self as a teacher and how that might translate into my work in the classroom.

The lesson for me, then, wasn’t that I had to find ways to embrace the contradiction that I work simultaneously within and against a system, that I must confront my inherent privilege and change my classroom practice accordingly in order to work within that contradiction. The lesson was that I had to find new ways to *think* about *my* teaching practice; ultimately, I had to rethink my *identity* as teacher—which, as I hope to show, is a source of further contradiction in teaching writing.

### Zen and the Critical Writing Teacher

Let me try to explain this rethinking by turning to another kind of enterprise that is deeply concerned with identity and the relationship between students and teachers: Zen. Those familiar with Zen have no doubt encountered *koans*, which are brief parable-like stories intended to assist students of Zen on their journeys to enlightenment. Koans are also intended to challenge logical and dualistic thinking, so they often seem silly and nonsensical. Always, they seem open to myriad and often conflicting interpretations. The following koan is called *The Blockhead Lord*:

Two Zen teachers, Daigu and Gudo, were invited to visit a lord. Upon arriving, Gudo said to the lord: “You are wise by nature and have an inborn ability to learn Zen.”

“Nonsense,” said Daigu. “Why do you flatter this blockhead? He may be a lord, but he doesn’t know anything of Zen.”

So, instead of building a temple for Gudo, the lord built it for Daigu and studied Zen with him. (Reps 62)

There are no doubt countless ways to make sense of this koan, and I do not wish to offer a general interpretation here. But like so many Zen koans, this one seems to offer insight into the nature of teaching. With that in mind, I’d like to make two points. First, if we think of this koan as a lesson about how to teach—and how not to teach—then we might see that Gudo’s big mistake here lies not in his flattery of the lord but in not recognizing the lord’s needs as a student. In fact, Zen teaches precisely what Gudo tells the lord here: that all people have “an inborn ability to learn Zen,” that they all have what is sometimes called “Buddha-nature.” Daigu, on the other hand, seems to recognize that this lord needs something other than a confirmation of his inherent Buddha-nature, so he resists the impulse to offer this confirmation and instead states very frankly that this

lord has quite a long way to go as a student of Zen. It's a mistake, I think, to see Daigu's response as simply telling it like it is. Rather, Daigu is seeing the student for who he is and, if I may push things a bit here, constructing a pedagogy appropriate for that student.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which has become a widely cited statement of some of the fundamental principles of critical pedagogy, Freire describes the teacher-student relationship in a way that I find remarkably similar to what Zen has to say about teaching. Freire takes great pains to explain how the teacher must become intimately familiar with the world of his or her potential students and then construct a literacy pedagogy that begins in that world. The "program content" of such a pedagogy, Freire writes, "is constituted and organized by the students' view of the world, where their own generative themes are found" (101). "It is not our role to speak to the people about our view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours" (85). In short, understand your students and their views and needs rather than impose your own agenda on them *a priori*.

Of course, this is far from a straightforward matter. Richard Miller has pointed out some of the difficulties that attend this effort on the part of the critical teacher to identify "generative themes" without imposing his or her own agenda on the students; he points out "the tension between the Freirean insistence on a collaborative methodology, where people are taught not what to think but how, and a practice that, almost magically, produces people who know exactly what to think about injustice and how it should be redressed" (14). Moreover, the teachers themselves seem to be imbued with none of the "learned and internalized oppressions" that Ellsworth describes. How, Miller wonders, do teachers have an apparent immunity from the "false consciousness" that they ultimately seek to eradicate among their students? In Miller's view, Freire sidesteps this difficult question through a "brilliant reversal," arguing that "those who feel that they are not, in fact, free or equal collaborators in this venture are the ones most lost to 'false consciousness'" (14). Such an explanation is obviously unsatisfactory to Miller, and he expresses puzzlement that writing teachers seem to have embraced Freire in the face of these seemingly unresolvable dilemmas. Is this, he asks, "just a story teachers like to tell themselves about themselves—a way to make it from semester to semester that preserves the teacher's sense of self-esteem?" (15). I think the answer, in large measure, is yes—though the situation may be somewhat less simple than Miller's tough question seems to imply.

Freire himself acknowledged the tricky ground a teacher treads in trying to address students' needs at the same time that those needs are understood in terms of the teacher's critical or liberatory agenda. The mere fact that he

devotes considerable space in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to a discussion of the pitfalls teachers face in identifying “generative themes” among their students suggests the depth of his concern that teachers will impose their thinking upon their students and thus fail to enact a truly liberatory pedagogy: “Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their action) the *men-in-a-situation* [sic] to whom their program was ostensibly directed” (83). Freire tries to avoid this kind of failure by focusing careful attention on the role of the teacher. He describes what he calls the “student-teacher contradiction” and acknowledges the way in which a teacher’s inherent authority can work against the development of the student’s “critical consciousness.” It is a delicate balancing act between acknowledging and using one’s legitimate authority as a teacher on the one hand and, on the other, taking appropriate measures to undercut that same authority so that it does not inhibit the effort to foster critical consciousness in students. This is precisely one of the chief difficulties that Ellsworth describes. And indeed Freire, who is quite insistent about the primacy of students’ own experience and worldview as a starting point for a liberatory pedagogy, never seems to find a way around the fact that, by his or her very presence, the teacher inevitably imposes an agenda on the student (about which more in a moment).

As Miller demonstrates, it may be an impossible task for a teacher to remain true to a Freirean agenda—or any truly student-centered agenda—and at the same time genuinely address students’ needs as they define them. The problem, as I see it, is that the teacher’s *identity* can get in the way of this effort. As Lil Brannon has suggested, Freire, along with those (such as Shor and Giroux) who have tried to apply his pedagogical ideas in the context of education in the United States, constructs a kind of “masculine heroic narrative...the teacher as critical warrior” (460). Such a construction of the teacher’s identity does not easily allow for the kind of uncertainty and doubt that seems to accompany the well-intentioned efforts of critical teachers. Moreover, as Brannon goes on to point out, the image of the teacher as idealist, as hero, as iconoclast, is well-rooted in American culture, which makes the culture hospitable ground for Freire’s assumptions about the teacher. (Think, for example, of the prevalence of characterizations of the teacher-as-hero in popular films, such as *Dead Poets Society* and *To Sir With Love*.) Yet those of us who teach understand, even if only nebulously, that this notion of teacher-as-hero, notwithstanding Brannon’s useful critique, is at once problematic and sustaining, for teaching—and, I’d argue, especially teaching literacy—is not only a difficult enterprise but always an ambiguous one. The problem with the image of teacher-as-hero, I think, is that it denies this ambiguity.

As I read Freire's work, it isn't until later, in *A Pedagogy of Hope*, that he seems to acknowledge some of this ambiguity, even as he reaffirms his commitment to his belief in literacy as a vehicle for political empowerment and his role as teacher in helping foster such a literacy. In *A Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire revisits some of the issues he took up in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and addresses some of the same kinds of criticisms of his work that Miller presents. More revealingly, he narrates some of the events that took place as he pursued his career as an educator, events that shaped his ideas about literacy and pedagogy and his sense of self as a teacher. And it is in these narratives that we begin to catch glimpses of the doubt, the uncertainty, that attend teaching. In one scene, Freire describes his interactions with Chilean peasants during a visit he made to what he calls "an agrarian reform project" (44). He admits to his own reluctance to engage the people there in conversation and then describes "a disconcerting silence" following a "lively dialogue" that had been characterized by "questions and replies on both sides." (How many of us have experienced such silences? How often do we write or speak publicly of them?) The silence is eventually broken by an apologetic peasant, who says, "Excuse us, sir...excuse us for talking. You're the one who should have been talking, sir. You know things, sir. We don't" (45).

Not surprisingly, Freire characterizes this moment as a reflection of the peasants' "naïveté," and in doing so seems to slip back into the voice of the heroic teacher that characterizes *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In a passage reminiscent of his discussion from that earlier work, he points out the folly of "filling" that silence with his own words, "thus reinforcing the ideology that they had just enunciated" (45). Fair enough. But what Freire seems to miss here—at least in his retelling—is that the peasant's apology not only was reflective of an ideology that assigned authority and credibility, and thus power, to Freire as *teacher* but also reinforced Freire's own sense of his identity as teacher, which is inextricably linked to that same ideology that he wishes to resist and change. In other words, Freire's own position as teacher, his own identity as liberatory educator, is much more conflicted and complex than he seems to let on. Even in his "enlightened" state, as one who has a measure of "critical consciousness" and who is ostensibly free of the ideology he fights, he as teacher can never stand completely outside that ideology because part of his effectiveness as a liberatory educator depends upon that identity of teacher-as-hero. He retains this identity that is a function of that ideology he opposes because he needs that identity to do his work as teacher.

Freire reinforces this point in his discussion of this incident. "My experience has taught me," he writes, "that educands need to be addressed as such; but to address them as educands implies a recognition of oneself, the

educator, as one of two agents here, each capable of knowing and each wishing to know, and each working with the other for an understanding of the object of cognition" (45–46). In other words, Freire will always be a *teacher* as he works with his *students*. Both are "agents" but each retains a distinct identity; and that teacher's identity, though necessary, nevertheless complicates the relationship between the two.

Lad Tobin complicates this tricky student-teacher relationship even further by drawing on psychoanalytic theory. To help explain some of the difficulties we encounter in our efforts to be effective teachers of writing, Tobin invokes the Freudian concept of *countertransference*, which he defines as "our unconscious responses to our students [and]...their unconscious responses to us." We need, Tobin writes, "to identify the extent to which our responses to our students and their writing are not neutral or objective, the extent to which countertransference responses interfere with our ability to help students improve their writing" (32). For Tobin, reflection on our teaching is a decidedly psychological endeavor that involves looking at how we, as *persons*, interact with our students. In short, our efforts to address our students' needs are wrapped up in the complex interpersonal relationships we inevitably have with our students, which are wrapped up in our identities and agendas not only as teachers but also as people.

But there is a crucial distinction to be made between *teacher* and *teaching*, one that is sometimes lost in our professional discussions. And here is where Daigu can help illuminate something that I think committed teachers eventually come to understand about teaching writing: *that good teaching is not about the teacher*. In the koan, Daigu recognizes, as Gudo apparently does not, that the lord must ultimately learn on his own. And that process is *not* about what the teacher wants. Gudo seems too concerned about what Gudo the teacher wants—for himself and for his potential student. Although Daigu does not "dialogue" with the student as Freire might like, his concern is not for himself but for his student: if this student is to learn Zen, he must acknowledge that he "knows nothing about Zen." Daigu doesn't care whether he offends the student or whether the student likes what he has to say; his relationship with the student is not about him but about the student's learning.

This complex student-teacher relationship, then, although it is affected by some of the same factors that influence all relationships, as Tobin suggests, and although it is shaped by complex and deeply rooted cultural attitudes toward teaching and learning, is not equivalent to other kinds of relationships we might have. What is crucially different is that the teacher's agenda must ultimately become secondary to the student's needs even as the teacher's identity remains a central part of the student's education. Zen, which relies so heavily on the teacher-student relationship, paradoxically

but appropriately expresses great ambivalence about this relationship. According to Zen teachings, the Buddha himself, upon attaining enlightenment, was reluctant to share his revelation with his followers, largely because he came to see the impossibility of conveying to others through direct instruction the profound insight he had gained. Lawrence Shainberg, in his book *Ambivalent Zen*, describes this paradox. Shainberg tells the story of how Shakyamuni, the Buddha, returned to his followers after his enlightenment:

On the one hand, he knows that his enlightenment is meaningless unless it is shared, but on the other, he is well aware that what he has to share is nothing more than the birthright of all human beings. How does one teach what is already known? By his own definition, there is no one alive who does not have Buddha-nature. It is like bringing water to the river. (35)

I cannot help but think of Freire and his idea of the “student-teacher contradiction” as I read this passage. Shainberg goes on to describe how Shakyamuni resolves this paradox:

Still, water does not appease one’s thirst until one drinks it. Though all possess what he possesses, most remain no less oblivious to it than he himself a few days before. River or not, they are dying of thirst... What choice has he but to share his water with them? (35–36)

I don’t want to push this analogy too hard, and I surely don’t want to represent my thoughts about teaching as on the level with the revelation about which Shainberg writes. But Zen’s approach to this paradox can help us see that the goal of a teacher ultimately is to make himself or herself obsolete, if only temporarily, to remove herself or himself from the center of the learning process, to convince students of their own abilities in order to enable them to develop those abilities on their own.

### Generosity in the Teaching of Writing

This has been a hard lesson for me. And, if my experience in preparing pre-service teachers is any guide, I think it’s a hard lesson for many teachers, but especially those who seek to enact critical pedagogies, those whose self-defined purpose is to help students redefine their relationship to the world. Almost by definition, the critical teacher is a catalyst and often seems to define his or her role as crucial for students’ “empowerment.” Moreover, most of the good teachers I have known see themselves as teachers. We don’t simply teach; we *are* teachers. And because writing as a social, cultural, and individual activity is wrapped up in complicated ways with episte-

mology and notions of the self, teachers of writing must negotiate some treacherous territory that other teachers may not need to traverse. From a postmodern perspective, we might see the writing teacher as occupying an especially complex and overdetermined “subject position”—or a set of conflicting subject positions—within a specific institutional and cultural context. That subject position gives the teacher a special though often conflicted status. And indeed, that special sense of identity can be essential for new teachers as they enter the enormously complicated task of teaching writing. Irwin Weiser acknowledges the importance of establishing this sense of identity among new teaching assistants teaching in the first-year composition program at Purdue University. He describes the ways in which these new teaching assistants are encouraged to see themselves as teachers, to understand their special relationship with students, to acknowledge their inherent authority in order to use it effectively in teaching writing. At some point, Weiser asserts, these teaching assistants must adopt the identity of teacher if they are to become effective writing teachers. Even Brannon, in critiquing prevailing masculine-oriented conceptions of the teacher, never entirely repudiates them, arguing instead that “in a society that has privileged patriarchal narratives, student-centered teachers and mothers and feminized professions like composition become objects to be powerful over” (462). For Brannon, the masculine image of teacher-as-authority must be replaced—by another image of teacher-as-authority.

Teachers of writing understand the importance of this special sense of identity, and it is difficult to give it up. By virtue of our own commitment to education and to writing and our years of hard work and experience, we believe that we have some idea of what students need as writers, just as Freire believed his critical pedagogy offered his students a way to confront the systemic economic and political oppressions they faced, just as Brannon believes her teaching can open up space for the voices of women in critical pedagogy. And that belief in ourselves places us at the center of the student-teacher relationship in precisely the way that Zen suggests we must not be yet cannot avoid.

And there is yet another thorny contradiction here. As Freire acknowledges in his effort to tease out this complex student-teacher relationship, at some point the teacher does indeed make decisions about what her or his students need and works from there. Even Daigu must do so. As I noted above, Freire seems to acknowledge that although the teacher must never usurp the student’s autonomy, nevertheless the teacher eventually must make some decisions about how and what to teach; indeed, the teacher makes a decision *to* teach, in many cases without being asked to do so by the student. And in the act of making that decision, the intensely personal interaction between teacher and student inevitably becomes

political, for to decide that students need a teacher is to impose an agenda, an ideology, on your students; it is to answer for them and thus to place yourself at the center of an enterprise that is ultimately not about you.

This is a catch-22 I'm not sure we need try to wriggle out of. Brannon and Knoblauch argue that we need "narratives of failure and error and merely partial success, along with the heroic stories" of our teaching (73). I agree, for such narratives can help us acknowledge and thus confront the kind of self-doubt that I described earlier, that seems inevitable in careful, committed teaching. But I'm not sure that's enough, since doing so seems to reinforce the central role of teacher without necessarily calling into question that role. In other words, our narratives of failure might serve simply to reinforce the idea that we didn't live up to our identities as teachers. Perhaps we need to reimagine that role of teacher in a way that doesn't simply redefine it from, say, a masculine hero to something different, as Brannon suggests we do, but questions the very role itself: a reimagining of teacher that doesn't allow us to ignore self-doubt even as we continue to believe in what we do. Some years back, Peter Elbow argued that we need to "embrace contraries" in our teaching. I don't know whether he knew how Zen-like such an argument really is, but it seems to me that he was fundamentally right. In acknowledging and thus working within what Elbow calls "contraries," we accept that we may occupy a central place in our students' lives—if only momentarily—even as we try to move from that place. We acknowledge, too, that we may sometimes impose even as we seek to empower. Moreover, by embracing "contraries" in this way, we avoid the dogmatism that characterizes too much of our scholarly and public discussions about teaching writing; we accept the uncertainty that comes with acknowledging that we, the teachers, may not know exactly what is right for all our students all the time—or even most of them some of the time. bell hooks writes that increasingly diverse classrooms demand that teachers acknowledge this uncertainty:

I don't think the professor's *place* in the classroom can remain the same, because there are so many areas in which we have gaps in our knowing. And where is the space in our pedagogical practice to admit, "I can't really be the primary teacher at this moment because I don't know enough." (Olson 88–89)

By acknowledging this uncertainty, we genuinely open ourselves up to the possibility that we are learners, too, and that good teaching is really about good learning. But part of that learning is the understanding that our *students'* learning is ultimately what matters most, as Daigu seems to have understood. Like most such insights, this one seems so simple as to be almost trite. But I don't think it is at all simple to put into practice.

Zen places great emphasis on the effort to understand and then deny the self. In denying the self, Zen teaches, we implicitly acknowledge our connection to others, because we begin to erase the boundaries that separate us as individuals. In this sense, Zen is really about others, and denying the self is the ultimate act of generosity. Chogyam Trungpa, a famous Buddhist teacher, writes about the importance of this kind of generosity in teaching:

Teachers must be prepared to learn from pupils, that is very, very important. Otherwise there is really no progress on the part of the students, because in a sense one would be too keen and interested in the process of making the pupils receive the expansion of one's ego and wanting to produce another you, rather than helping them to develop ability on their own. (47)

Freire also invokes this idea of generosity in his discussions of teaching literacy. A pedagogy of the oppressed, he writes, is "animated by authentic, humanist (not humanitarian) generosity" (*Oppressed* 39). He warns against "false" generosity, in which those in positions of power seem to give of themselves to those who are oppressed (45). True generosity, he suggests, grows out of the teacher's sense not of her or his identity as teacher but out of a sense of the humanity of the students. This leads to humility, without which, Freire asserts, dialogue between student and teacher cannot exist: "How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own?" (78). That Freire's work seems often not to reflect this same humility indicates the challenge it can be for committed teachers to engage in pedagogies that are really not about themselves, but truly about their students.

Reflecting on my experiences in my graduate course at SUNY-Albany was painful in part because I came to realize the extent to which I failed to understand the importance of this generosity and humility. And I think I failed in the same way at Purdue University, despite the teaching awards. My students there responded positively to me because they believed I was helping them become like me: a teacher. They wanted that identity—the very identity that I have learned I need to erase.

Coming to understand this has at times led to the kind of self-doubt to which I referred earlier: an immense uncertainty that becomes an obstacle to teaching. For some, such doubt can result in paralysis, as it did for my student teacher. For others, like Richard Miller, it leads to what I think is a productive—though often difficult—kind of questioning about a teacher's pedagogy and responsibility to students. For me, initially, it led to a kind of mechanical teaching in which I avoided the very kind of reflection that I value. Like Freire and the Chilean peasant, I became silent about my teaching and my students. But as Freire writes, we "are not built in silence, but

in word, in work, in action-reflection" (76). And the kind of doubt that paralyzed me remains an obstacle only to the extent that one desires to cling to one's identity as a teacher. If, on the other hand, this doubt grows out of "action-reflection" that attends a genuine effort to address students' needs as literate persons, then this inevitable doubt becomes a manifestation of the generosity to which Trungpa refers. In other words, it can be an opportunity for careful, critical self-reflection about one's teaching and the nature of the relationship one is building with students. And doubt then becomes generative, a vehicle for gaining insight into the enormously complex and often unsettlingly difficult enterprise that makes a truly engaged and reflective pedagogy.

In talking about this experience with a friend who encountered similar difficulties in a graduate course she taught at her own university, I described to her the ambivalent reactions of two early reviewers of this article. She suggested that one source of that ambivalence may be the reluctance many of us in composition studies feel about discussing our graduate teaching. We see composition studies as fundamentally about teaching, and the sort of doubt about teaching that I have been discussing may seem threatening and perhaps even counter-productive. Moreover, obvious risk attaches to acknowledging problems in our graduate teaching, since our own professional identities are so much at stake in graduate courses. And there seems to be the unstated—and unexamined—assumption that "good" scholars are also "good" teachers. But if reflective practice and liberatory pedagogies are valid goals for teachers of writing, then we should not ignore these problems and the doubt that accompanies them. Nor should we ignore, I think, the ambiguity of our roles as teachers of writing and the difficulties that such ambiguity can cause us as well as our students.

For me, this task of confronting that ambiguity must begin with those student evaluations. But it cannot end there.

## Notes

1. Ellsworth's "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths Of Critical Pedagogy" is perhaps the best-known example of such an account. Other accounts that address difficulties in enacting critical pedagogies are Tompkins' "Pedagogy of the Distressed," and Berlin's "Not a Conclusion: A Conversation." A recent rethinking of the field's embrace of Freirean critical pedagogy is Richard E. Miller's "The Arts of Complicity." Maureen M. Hourigan, in a review of critical pedagogies intended specifically to address the needs of "basic

writers," critiques several such accounts, including Thomas Fox's *The Social Uses of Writing*, and concludes, "I am not arguing against radical pedagogy, but I am suggesting that it is far more difficult to implement than compositionists might think and that it can have exactly the opposite effect from the one it is intended to promote, the establishment of a literacy community where people who care about one another converse" (52). I'm suggesting here that these very difficulties are likely much more widespread than we tend to acknowledge and that they can result in

the kind of self-doubt I am addressing in this article.

2. C. H. Knoblauch provides a description of one form of this “resistance” to critical pedagogy and offers a provocative way of understanding such “resistance” as a result of his students’ “middle-class innocence” (17). He goes on to question “the real plausibility of liberatory teaching in circumstances where there is a powerful self-interest, rooted in class advantage, that works actively, if not consciously, against critical reflectiveness” (19). Such an understanding of student resistance is precisely the kind of thing that I am suggesting can lead to self-doubt among thoughtful and committed teachers of writing.

3. I am conceiving of *identity* here as the way in which we understand ourselves—and the way others understand us—within a specific context. Identity is thus a sense of self

shaped by a variety of factors. It is a function of the roles we play—and are allowed to play—within a specific context as those roles are shaped by institutional and cultural forces; it is also a function of social factors such as age, gender, race, and so on. I want to distinguish here between identity and the common postmodern term *subject position*. As I am defining identity, it is shaped by but not equivalent to the various subject positions that may be available to a person in a given context. For instance, I may in a certain context occupy a subject position of “male teacher” as it is circumscribed by discourses and circumstances within that context; but that subject-position is not equivalent to my identity as “teacher,” which would encompass that subject position but would also be shaped by the kinds of broader social and cultural factors to which I’ve already referred.

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