

# Returning to Community and Praxis

A Circuitous Journey through Pedagogy  
and Literary Studies

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“Okay, we have one minute to figure this out,” I said before the class threatened to crash and burn. I had explained to the students that the course, *The Experience of Education*, was experimental, which means not everything we tried would work, but I had not anticipated such a failure. I had adopted an idea from Eleanor Duckworth (1987): ask students to find out why and how the moon has phases and then reflect on how they learned this. But the equipment I brought in as manipulatives — flashlights, balls of various sizes — had not been up to the task. We had come out of small groups in various dark corners of the library still perplexed and then spent twenty minutes trying to process the experience of not learning. With seconds left, one of the students saved us all: “Just look at everybody’s face!”

We were sitting around a circular table with windows on only one wall, and according to our positions, the shadows on our faces corresponded to the different appearances of the moon, with the student directly facing the window as the full moon, the one facing away as the new moon, and the rest of us as all the gradations between. The student had created an effective analogy between faces and phases: as we looked at the light on one another’s features we could also see the dawning of comprehension. Such occasions of imaginative learning are moments of unsought grace, happenings that elude our lesson plans and lecture notes, holistic experiences in which the dualisms of intellect and emotion, abstraction and the concrete, knowing and action embrace. But unlike private

epiphanies such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's in crossing a bare common, this experience was shared, intersubjective, communal.

We have all had such moments, but they are often accompanied by the anxiety that they will never happen again — Emerson (1983: 10) was “glad to the brink of fear.” How do we multiply and institutionalize such moments? When the editors of *Pedagogy* asked me to address “the most pressing problem pedagogically facing our discipline,” I was ambivalent, because for me the problem is writing articles instead of making sure the articles actually change the world. While we do not know everything about learning and teaching, we know much more than we have been able to turn into practice in our classrooms. We do not have to be polemical now as much as political and practical; we write articles because that is what we know how to do, instead of daring to challenge the glacially inert institutions of our educational system, boldness this system will hardly reward.

I write this article, then, appreciative of the irony, but also out of an abiding affection for *Pedagogy*, whose mission strikes me as crucial. In its first issue, the journal's editors declared that it “seeks to create a new way of talking about teaching by fusing theoretical approaches and practical realities. . . . It is intended as a forum for critical reflection and as a site for spirited and informed debate from a multiplicity of positions and perspectives. It strives to reverse the long-standing marginalization of teaching and the scholarship produced around it and instead to assert the centrality of teaching to our work as scholars and professionals” (Holberg and Taylor 2001: 1). For me the interface between theory and practice is not only the place to improve teaching but also what needs to be restored as the focus for all genuine learning.

The urgency of restoring this focus has been widely recognized, furthered by ten years of *Pedagogy* and by such crucial books as Jane Tompkins's *A Life in School* (1996) and Elaine Showalter's *Teaching Literature* (2003). Put briefly, we have found that in real learning the student constructs knowledge and paradigms instead of passively receiving them, that meaning is created in interactions with the world and texts, and that, as William James once noted, we can see only as far into a generalization as our knowledge of specifics allows (cited in Allen 1967: 214) — or, in Zora Neale Hurston's (1998: 285) vernacular, “Yuh got tuh go there to *know* there.” In this article I want to explore both obstacles and possibilities in closing the gap between utopian vision and institutional practice through the lens of my own career, which I now see as an arc from committed action through the dark night of solitary academic work to a reaffirmation of intellectual community and participatory democracy.

I began this career in the 1960s, not through the usual channels but as part of what some of us called the Movement, in Emerson's (1883: 325) expansive and general sense of the word: "There are always two parties, the party of the Past and the party of the Future; the Establishment and the Movement." We viewed the existing school system as a failure that suppressed rather than fostered learning, especially for students already marginalized by race and class. My first teaching and tutoring experiences were guerrilla actions outside the Establishment, in church basements and storefronts with groups like the Northern Student Movement and the Roxbury Basic Reading Program. We took inspiration and strategies from the civil rights movement and felt that the institutions of society, however unjust and repressive, were ultimately malleable, vulnerable to pressure from committed young people, such as the African American college students who catalyzed the push for desegregation through their stand, or rather, their sitting at lunch counters in the South.

This movement to change the world through changing education turned into the spread of what were called free schools or open classrooms. While its philosophy was decidedly student centered and antiauthoritarian, in its best manifestations it went beyond Summerhillian anarchy and anti-intellectualism to a concern with how students learn best and how to arrange schools accordingly rather than fitting them into procrustean structures and curricula. It borrowed from the work being done in some British primary schools of the time, from studies of cognitive psychologists such as Jean Piaget, and from the discovery methods in science education. The permanent legacy was the most vibrant clustering of books on education in U.S. history, mostly written by young teachers with literary talent but with little formal training in education. The best of these were John Holt's *How Children Fail* (1982 [1964]), Herbert Kohl's *Thirty-Six Children* (1967), James Herndon's *The Way It Spozed to Be* (1968), and George Dennison's *The Lives of Children* (1969). Their very titles convey a deep concern with the students these writers came to love, but the books also focused on the teachers, each becoming a kind of bildungsroman tracing the author's growth into fuller understanding of self and schools. Usually the school year provided the temporal structure for the narrative, in which the teachers and students became familiar characters with whose conflicts, alliances, and destinies the reader became as deeply involved as in any novel. Further, these books were written in styles and with structures that complemented the learning methods they advocated, the concrete situations giving rise to larger hypotheses and generalizations.

What was heartbreaking was how rapidly these promises faded. When the chalk dust cleared, the final score was Establishment 1, Movement 0. The

open classroom changed first from a pedagogical concept to an architectural one, with moveable sliders rather than fixed walls, and then the walls went back up, literally and figuratively, in thousands of schools. This drama of auspicious beginnings and dashed hopes was reflected in my own experiences. After working in urban centers, my wife and I took positions at a residential state-run high school in rural Kentucky for academically gifted disadvantaged students. The Lincoln School allowed both children and teachers more freedom; through the course of the year I found myself increasingly abandoning the usual classroom structures and helping the students set up their own reading and writing programs as individuals or in groups. But one thing we were unable to teach — perhaps because we had so little of it ourselves — was tact in politically sensitive situations. During the national anthem at a basketball game with the local high school, some of our students gave the Black Power salute, some the peace sign; the state legislature closed the school with lightning speed.

After this experience, I was reluctant to teach in a conventional school and also found myself missing the intellectual stimulation of my college years. I entered a PhD program in literature but quickly discovered that my undergraduate adviser, Bill Pritchard, was not joking when he said graduate study was like undergraduate work, only more boring. When I arrived at my first class, the large seminar table had been moved into separate smaller tables with chairs around each one, an arrangement more suitable for a duplicate bridge tournament than a class discussion. We all took our seats, many of us with our backs to each other, while the professor talked at us for two hours from the front of the room. I was struck by the professor's obliviousness to and abstraction from the physical reality of this situation, seemingly not realizing he could ask us to take a minute to restore the room, and took the incident as a parable for how quickly intelligent people, who themselves are not authoritarian, accept the situation of education as a given, as an immovable object they never consider trying to budge.

After graduate school I was hired by the University of Colorado, Boulder, where I still teach. I did not leave activism completely behind — I took part in a sit-in against my own department in support of a composition program for minority students — but although I opened my own classroom, a rift remained between my research and my teaching. After some years I began to look for projects that would bring the two closer together, the first of which was editing the MLA volume on teaching *Moby-Dick* (Bickman 1985). The committee evaluating my first promotion bid moved this work from the “research” column to the “teaching” one, the very kind of dichotomy I had

hoped the work would move us beyond. I wanted to demonstrate that writing about teaching did not have to be a second-order experience but could take us at least as close to the heart of a work as traditional criticism; my goal was to suggest that the classroom can be a laboratory for the humanities where we can construct, test, and revise our hypotheses about what and how literature means. And while some of the contributors initially had difficulty being as specific and insightful about their own classrooms as they were about texts, several of the articles bore out my hopes, such as Millicent Bell's "The Indeterminate *Moby-Dick*." Without getting bogged down in theoretical jargon, Bell adopted a reader-response stance that allowed her to show how reading through the book along with the students could be mutually beneficial.

We are too likely to sacrifice—for ourselves and our students—the acknowledgement of doubt, of irreducibility, and our and their negative capability as readers. Teaching may, however, provide teachers with an opportunity to regain this capability for themselves as they cherish it in their students. In the company of students they re-perceive the lost text they once encountered. They may discover that even the most closed of structures possesses an openness, in the sense of a resistance to resolved interpretations, and that this resistance, which seems to grow less with rereading and study, is a feature of the work that should not be forgotten. Readers who think they have solved all the puzzles, arrived at all the answers to questions of meaning, perhaps no longer read: those who win through to the last page after travail and error and grow in understanding without surrendering doubt are themselves heroes of the work they have experienced. (23–24)

Bell's discussion confirmed what some of the other teachers and I had experienced, that students can have problems in reading in two opposite ways: either they have trouble forming any interpretations at all in the sometimes chaotic flux of the book or they make interpretations too quickly and glibly. The latter reminds me of *The Phantom Tollbooth*'s overcrowded Island of Conclusions, to which one travels very easily by jumping but from which it is far more difficult to escape (Juster 1961: 164–70). The antidote is a careful classroom reading, sentence by sentence, word by word, simulating the process of our first reading but slowing down to help the students become more reflective and analytical, having them linger over passages like the one in *Moby-Dick* where the narrator reflects on "the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all" (Melville 2002 [1851]: 20).

Already in the first chapter Ishmael seems to have disabled any philosophical suspense by giving away “the key to it all.” But the more we try to grasp what this is, the more it becomes as elusive as our own reflection in the water (“we ourselves see”). What, for example, are the referents in the last sentence of “its” and “this”? How can an image be both “tormenting” and “mild,” and how could it depict something that is “ungraspable”? (Perhaps the same way one could “delineate chaos” [26].) What is the relation between the physical and the metaphysical in the use of words working on both planes, such as “deeper” and “grasp”? While there is much about *Moby-Dick* that our students cannot experience directly (although during one NEH summer seminar on Herman Melville we took our students to Mystic Seaport to row whale boats and climb the rigging), what we can share with them is the experience of reading, first individually and then as a group. Despite the gripping action scenes, the real drama of *Moby-Dick* and one of its main themes is the play of language in the interchange between writer and reader, a drama we can constantly recreate in our classrooms. It is a book that, as one critic says, “seeks to create . . . a literary world of which the reader must become a part before its final reality comes into being” (Brodtkorb 1965: 148).

Such thinking made me reconsider the relation of the theory revolution and its relation or nonrelation to pedagogy. I felt that poststructuralism, especially deconstruction and reader-response theory, had great potential to restructure pedagogy but that such reconceptualizing was indeed happening only in theory. For example, in interviewing job candidates from the most theoretically advanced graduate schools, I found that the structures of authority in the classroom, the ways in which students and teachers interacted or did not interact, remained largely untouched. Noted professors persisted in reading to their students their latest chapters on how authority was decentered in texts; too often, the only reader response that mattered was that of Stanley Fish or another eminence. Critics like Norman Holland and David Bleich did go beyond this to analyze the responses of undergraduates, but their frameworks were more often clinical than pedagogical, and they did not ask these students to make the analyses themselves. As a reaction to this I designed a graduate course, *Theory and the Teaching of Literature*, that included the study of living readers; there was a text in this class, but it was an undergraduate course we all taught together. We met for the hour immediately after each undergraduate class to share our perceptions and analyses of it, to relate it to theories we had read or formulated ourselves, and to plan the next class in the light of all this. We also read carefully and often as a group the daily journals of the undergraduates and all drafts of their more formal

papers. We trained ourselves to listen to and record the class discussions. Somewhat vertiginously, we also subjected our own graduate class to similar analyses of group process and meaning making.

I have outlined our pedagogical discoveries elsewhere (Bickman 1995, 2003), so here I will emphasize that the student engagement in and work accomplished by this graduate course was radically different from those of my more conventional classes. In two decades of teaching this course, I recorded fewer absences than in one semester of my more traditional classes. I could dispense with grades entirely, because the motivation to help the undergraduates learn was far stronger than anything external. The graduate students took ownership of the class, assigning their own readings and projects. The competitiveness that usually underlies graduate seminars was replaced by a sense of common endeavor, because the main result of our work was not individual papers but the creation of two related communities, the undergraduates and us.

I sought not to clone myself as a teacher but rather to help the graduate students theorize their own teaching, as close observers and reflective practitioners who could use the perpetual feedback of the classroom to revise their strategies. I also know that teachers teach only in ways they have learned, so I tried to make our own class as organically experiential as possible and not let its members do unthinkingly what had been done to them in their own educations. We all wrote educational autobiographies and had the undergraduates do the same to get at some of the roots of our learning and teaching behaviors. The one change I asked them all to make was the Copernican shift from teacher performance to student learning, described by Jane Tompkins in her article “Pedagogy of the Distressed” (1990: 654).

I remember walking down the empty hall to class . . . and thinking to myself, “I have to remember to find out what they want, what they need, and not worry about whether what I’ve prepared is good enough or ever gets said at all.” Whereas, for my entire teaching life I had always thought that what I was doing was helping my students to understand the materials we were studying[.]. . . I had finally realized what I was concerned with . . . was to show students how smart I was. . . . I think that this essentially, and more than anything else, is what we teach our students: how to perform within an institutional academic setting in such a way that they will be thought highly of by their colleagues and instructors.

In other words, the course was designed to break this chain, to stress learning over teaching, thinking over having once thought. It was also designed to help

the graduate students integrate all sides of their professional lives, to look at a stack of student papers not as a chore but as an opportunity to seek out both the similarities and differences in how readers process a particular text, to align the daily work of teaching with their research and writing.

I was a beneficiary of this last goal, since teaching the course led me to make the connections between my work in American literary and intellectual history that were staring me in the face all the time. I had a slow learning curve, but eventually I discovered or constructed a set of systematic connections between what we had learned about teaching and what I began to call a tradition of active learning that started with the transcendentalists, continued with pragmatists like William James and John Dewey, and flourished briefly in the 1960s and 1970s. This tradition remains the minority position and a vital undercurrent challenging the structures of bureaucracy, standardization, and mindless replication that now more than ever dominate our public school system. I trace this division from the scene of “The American Scholar,” which Emerson delivered in 1837 with Horace Mann in the audience. The latter, a well-intentioned reformer, had just become the first Massachusetts secretary of education and almost without realizing it helped initiate the homogenization and sterilization of American education. As David Tyack (1967: 31) puts it: “The school reformers of Horace Mann’s generation hoped to create system where they saw chaos. . . . The quest for educational uniformity began as individual agitation, gained momentum as others joined the cause, and finally became fixed by law or institutional custom—thus becoming a self-perpetuating pattern of institutional behavior.” Emerson, by contrast, sees education as not just the transmission of culture but as an arena for its negotiation and creation. He begins the speech with his holistic parable of the One Man, which suggests, long before Dewey, that society should be a function of education rather than the other way around. Emerson (1983: 56–57) goes on to argue that the products of culture can imprison as well as liberate: “The books of an older period will not fit this. Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation—the act of thought—is transferred to the record . . . as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue.” Emerson goes on to describe what he sees as the necessary and ceaseless dialectic between thinking and action: “The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action” (60).

One conclusion I reached from writing *Minding American Education: Reclaiming the Tradition of Active Learning* (2003) is that American education has been the victim of a needless and self-defeating battle between tradi-

tionalists, who focus on book knowledge, and progressives, who focus on the students' personal experience. Each has only a part of the truth, which is that learning consists in always moving between the symbolic and the immediate. But while the book was something of a culminating and unifying experience, I took it as more a call to action than a prelude to writing more books like it. For Henry David Thoreau (1981 [1941]: 19), a book should elicit the following response: "I must lay it down and commence living on its hint. . . . What I began by reading I must finish by acting." I felt that I needed to expand the relation of practice and thinking beyond my own classroom, so I took a position as director of service learning to create, with other similarly inclined instructors, structures that allow academic study and community work to inform each other. In the light of all this I would like to suggest to readers of this journal and myself three directions in which we should move.

*We need to broaden and deepen the intellectual and social bases for what we do and write.* Too often our disciplinary limits have acted as blinders. Every once in a while *PMLA* publishes a cluster of pieces nominally about teaching, but most often the vast majority of citations are to theorists the authors have read as part of their literary studies, the usual suspects—Foucault, Derrida, and Said. I find particularly troubling our ignorance of an entire subfield, English education. By ignoring the body of knowledge in each other's fields we lose the ability to have dialogues with K–12 teachers. Janet Emig (1990: 87–88) has written about this barrier in "Our Missing Theory," which begins with a culture clash between college and elementary teachers.

If the elementary teachers were hearing for the first time such names as Lacan and Derrida, many of the college participants were hearing also for the first time such names as Clay, Donaldson, Luria, and even Vygotsky. To overgeneralize, the theories that the college participants knew attempted to characterize universals of textuality and language; the theories the public school teachers knew attempted to characterize the developmental dimension of learning and teaching, the dimension that suggests that all of us evolve through phases, stages, episode, periods . . . as we mature as doers and thinkers.

In other words, the public school teachers had a more diachronic sense of how students learn to read and write, one that complements the literary theorists' synchronic notions of how texts work. What kinds of fruitful studies might we literary scholars do if we tried to combine these approaches in tracking our students' development over the course of a semester, or even over the course of reading a single book? I have seen the power of such

cross-fertilizations in the graduate class I described above, where I actively recruit doctoral students in education to share their knowledge with our literature and creative writing students. In my own work I am trying to follow the lead of Louise Rosenblatt, especially in her first book (1938), of joining reader-response theory to a Deweyan sense of democratic community. In our graduate class, for example, we began to explore the notion that texts may be interpreted both communally and individually, as the students from small discussion groups encounter the readings of other groups in large class discussions.

*We as teachers and researchers need to change our models of work and move beyond solitary efforts to form communities of joint endeavor.* Probably the best analysis of what David Damrosch, in *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (1995: 7), calls “the archaic hyperindividualism of our prevailing academic ethos” is found in this book. Damrosch points out that many of us are by nature *isolatoes* and that this predisposition is increasingly reinforced by our education and subculture.

Over the years we have built up a system that gives high marks to people who flunk sandbox; professors who are themselves most comfortable when working alone have come to assume that their students should adopt a similar mode of work. The very structuring of our graduate training emphasizes an increasing isolation, as students go from working in courses to working with a few professors for their doctoral orals, and then working alone in the library to complete a dissertation, often under the guidance of a single sponsor. (10)

Our colleagues in the laboratory sciences who work in teams are veritable social butterflies compared to those of us in the humanities and social sciences.

I am not naive enough to think we can change the culture of the university without changing the reward structure, particularly for our younger colleagues. But we should take on this fight as yet another teachable moment with other faculty and administrators. Currently the system rewards primarily individual effort and work that fits very narrow definitions of productivity. One of my colleagues was denied promotion the first time around because too many of his publications were written with students. Few besides Damrosch have written of this narrowness and arbitrariness, but one of the most clear-headed critiques is an article by Nicholas Bromell (1995: 107) that challenges the notion that “the path to professional recognition, status, and reward leads through the library, through the word processor, and through professional conventions” and disregards “our work precisely to the degree that it eventu-

ates in other forms of action.” For a less dichotomizing and schizophrenic epistemology, Bromell turns to John Dewey.

Attacking the philosophical premise that a knowing subject stands outside experience and has nonexperiential access (by way of thought) to a reality more real than that offered by or *in* experience, Dewey cleared the ground for new, more flexible possibilities for intellectual work. For once thinking is seen not as a distinction from but as an *extension* of experience, then we can recognize and accord value to the intellectual content of activities and experiences formerly regarded as devoid of such content. . . . Finally, when regarded in this light, thinking must be verified not just by other thinking but also with reference to the consequences of its interaction with the world. (105)

Both Damrosch and Dewey revive Emerson’s notion of the interdependence of thinking and action in ways that can make the argument to our colleagues that “teaching, research, and service” should be synergistic rather than separate boxes.

*Just as we need to form communities with our colleagues, we should deliberately cultivate alliances with our students as partners in examining and reforming their own education.* We often ignore the best resource for informed change, one that is right in front of our noses every day—our students, for whom the most is at stake. We must be deliberate and patient, though, in giving them conceptual help and practice in reflecting on their own learning. Indeed, this was the primary task of the “Experience of Education” course, by the end of which most of the students had become agents shaping their own educations. We usually stopped class activities a few minutes before the end of the period and tried to articulate what we saw happening. We also tried to transform general whining into specific strategies for change. In this area I often learn more from my students than they do from me. For example, one student coached us to approach teachers not with our own complaints but with a question that opens up mutual concerns, such as “How’s the course going for you?” One embodiment of the course prepared a report on how to reform the university and invited our president to a class meeting for discussion of it. But we should incorporate these elements into any course we teach. Rather than being detours to subject matter, they directly enhance the students’ learning of it, as numerous studies on what people in education call “metacognition” have shown. I have found such work with students personally sustaining and energizing. After four decades of tilting at the educational windmills of unthinking habit and getting knocked on my backside most of

the time, I find the gains in growth and power of individual students and classes a counterforce for optimism and possibility, a way of keeping alive the idealism and transformative energy many of us felt in our youth.

The first step in changing the system is to change ourselves. We cannot reform pedagogy while remaining within the same narrow structures of solitary work that produces only more words, more words. The good news is that, far from requiring personal sacrifice, this task can be undertaken with a renewed Blakean joy in intellectual combat. We can forge relations with colleagues and students that go beyond the social to a sense of shared purpose and democratic solidarity. I hope in the next ten years we can use *Pedagogy* as a forum to exchange ideas about not only our own classrooms but also our efforts to take the principles we want to see realized there into our own lives and institutions.

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