In Defense of Teaching: Revisiting “A Classroom Is Well Named”
By Florian Pohl

John Raines’ work on the socially reproductive dynamics of higher education has been a frequent challenge for my conscience, especially his “A Classroom is Well Named.” My professional identity is intimately linked to my teaching. I am a teacher-scholar, and rightfully in that order. For the past seven years I have worked at a teaching-focused, small liberal arts college where all of my courses in Religious Studies are part of the General Education Program. Teaching load and heavy expectations for work with students outside of the classroom have made maintaining a productive research agenda an uphill battle. I am in the classroom each day for a total of thirteen hours per week. I spend most of my professional energy on teaching-related concerns. I am not complaining. In the interest of self-disclosure I will readily admit that I enjoy teaching. But tying my professional identity to teaching is morally problematic because of the structural function education plays in American society.

In his “A Classroom Is Well Named” John Raines confronts the dilemma that as teachers we want to think of ourselves as helping students succeed but that a more systematic analysis of power and wealth reveals how limited we are in changing social hierarchies that remain intimately connected to patterns of class and privilege established at birth. What is more, Raines implicates the teaching profession in their reproduction by disguising and thereby legitimating the dynamics of class and privilege with the promise of opportunity (231). What then, Raines asks, can we who are teachers say in defense of our practice? In his answer he offers a moral defense of the teaching vocation by focusing on the practice of teaching as “subversive activity” that openly speaks of the realities of class in our society (ibid.).

Most of our students in higher education are “lucky inheritors” of relative class privilege bestowed to them at birth (231). To teach subversively then, for Raines, is to be concerned with the moral content in our teaching of this majority. Our teaching must sharpen our students’ moral awareness. If and when we teach openly about the injustices of social class we help lucky inheritors understand that their relative advantage is not simply of their own making but the result of a common history. Such subversive teaching must lead to what Raines calls “a critical or radical noblesse oblige” (234). It is a commitment to the common good based on the realization that private and common good are inextricably linked. It is subversive because its practice ultimately will lead to new and progressive politics as some of the lucky inheritors, with a sharpened moral awareness of social class realities, move into positions of power and influence to shape such politics.

When first reading “A Classroom is Well Named” outside of the regular readings for a class in Social Ethics I was particularly intrigued by the distinction Raines makes between “lucky inheritors” and “magnificent survivors” to describe the students we find in our classroom. The focus on the lucky inheritors and questions of future policy, however, also left me curious as to the complexities of the educational realities of the other group we find alongside the lucky inheritors in our classroom: the magnificent survivors. What does teaching subversively look like when we consider the educational experience of the
magnificent survivors who, less privileged at birth but having managed despite all odds to start a college career, find their way into our classroom where they sit next to their peers of lucky inheritors?

Searching more deeply for how my classroom can provide a subversive experience for the magnificent survivors (as well as their peers) I began to make connections between the liberating momentum of speaking openly about the realities of social class Raines demanded and the understanding of education as the practice of freedom that I found reflected in the writings of Paulo Freire and bell hooks on critical pedagogy. In both cases learning is profoundly political. Where “A Classroom Is Well Named” had focused me on the moral content of my teaching, the latter also reminded me that, if we are concerned with our students’ intellectual development as independent and critical thinkers, we must reflect not only on what but also on how we teach. For learning to be liberatory and counter-hegemonic we must leave behind what bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* calls the “banking system of education” with its focus on dispensing authoritative information to students and requiring them to retain and restate it later for a grade (5). For students to become independent thinkers, empowered with the critical skills necessary to challenge established orthodoxies, our classroom must provide them not only with content, progressive or otherwise, but also with the experience of being independent thinkers who engage with the knowledge of our disciplines, each other, and us in challenging and critical ways.

My personal reflections on these pedagogical questions have been aided greatly by the process of programmatic curricular changes at my institution over the past years. Teaching at a small liberal arts college, we have created a new shared intellectual framework in which General Education takes place. Instead of focusing on a core curriculum with common content we have adopted a “Ways of Knowing” approach that draws attention both to the discipline-specific processes of knowledge production, its power and limitations, and to trans-disciplinary perspectives and skills. The declared aim is that students do not only learn fundamental concepts and principles in each discipline but also actively learn, practice, and critique the ways in which a particular discipline produces knowledge. Students learn how to think as, say, a biologist by focusing on how a scholar in any given discipline reads, measures, asks questions, seeks evidence, relates ideas, and solves problems. Chief among the learning outcomes are students’ intellectual growth and maturity by growing from dependent learners, with a belief in the certainty of knowledge and unquestionable authority of experts, to engaged learners, who recognize uncertainty and the contingency of knowledge claims.

In the fall semester 2011 we officially launched the first component of our new General Education Program (GEP): the Ways of Inquiry courses. All of the courses in the GEP share an inductive approach to teaching and learning that starts with the specific and moves to the abstract. They start with questions, are student-centered and often collaborative, and they put progressively more responsibility on students for their own learning. Placing learning in the context of concrete, often student-generated questions and searching for answers from within the perspectives of our disciplines is empowering for many students because it allows them to make connections between how they learn and how they live.
Our experience two years into the program dovetails with a growing body of evidence suggesting not only that inductive teaching approaches such as inquiry-based learning lead to greater and more lasting learning gains than traditional instructional models but also that women, minority students, and members of disadvantaged groups benefit most from these approaches (Hemlo-Silver, Duncan, and Chinn 104).

Exploring new pedagogical approaches in my classroom, however, has come with its own set of challenges. Resistance from some of the lucky survivors for whom a different set of educational practices has been the norm and legitimator of their success is one of them. Another is the recognition that guiding students in exploring my discipline through questions that meaningfully connect to their lives requires a level of openness and flexibility in my teaching that, although often exciting, is also uncomfortable. Gone are the days where I alone could set the classroom agenda and, with relative ease, display my disciplinary expertise. The need for an open and flexible agenda that allows students to take their inquiries in unusual and previously unimagined directions places novel demands on what it means for me to stay current in my field to guide students through their explorations. Finally, for these intellectual and moral explorations to succeed they have to be a collective endeavor. To take increasingly more responsibility for their own learning demands that students experience the classroom as a space where everyone’s presence counts and where I and their peers are invested in them as people and learners.

Teaching is inescapably political. But beyond this it also has the potential to be liberating. The concern for liberation as the practice and result of our teaching is where the subversive teaching of “A Classroom Is Well Named” merges with the demands of critical pedagogy. And it is from this perspective that I continue to find that we have something meaningful to say in defense of our practice. Although “A Classroom Is Well Named” provides mainly the moral content of subversive teaching, those of us who had the privilege to spend time with John Raines in the classroom will readily testify to the excitement and joy we experienced learning with him that were the result of both the moral content and the special quality of our learning community. Thank you, John, for your compassion, patience, and investment in us, for taking us seriously as human beings, and for treating us as colleagues as we explore what it means to see and live more truthfully in the world.

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