

Presentation

Feminist Pedagogy Conference: Transformations
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Where is the (CC) Classroom?
Seeking Social Justice; Finding Social Agency

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I joined the full-time faculty at Kingsborough in Spring '05. My first six years at KCC I wrote my dissertation while teaching full-time. During that period, a realization had started to dawn sort of in the corner of my mind, but it was one I wasn't free to actualize, or even fully realize, until 2011 when I completed my doctoral degree. Having just come off of five years teaching year-round at Hunter College, I began to realize that the teaching part of our three-part job (teaching, service, scholarship) extended, of necessity, beyond class time, beyond the classroom, beyond the teaching of course content and course-related skills. And while this may be true, to some extent, at any institution of higher ed, it's *more* true at the community college. And, by a truly wide margin. There are numerous complicated factors explicating why my job at Hunter felt so materially different from teaching at Kingsborough. That so many of our students enter the school in remediation, under-prepared for college work, is one. That around 40% of our students live *beneath* the poverty line is another, that they thus live their lives on the line—of hunger, homelessness, safety, with the specter of stop and frisk and other forms of municipally sanctioned brutality and degradation—is another reason.

This realization had begun, over time, to reshape and rewrite my understanding of myself and my role as a teacher. I came to see as compulsory actions I started taking following my defense and deposit – actions taken in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's murder, for example, and the shocking result of his killer's trial; actions also taken as Coordinator of our then mostly defunct common reading program; and, actions taken outside campus, in the realms of political and arts activism. One of those events (see picture) was an arts piece I participated in with four students, including two of today's panelists – DM and ZA -- called *Between the Door and the Street* (see picture). This performance art project, led by California-based artist Suzanne Lacy, focused on questions of being women in today's world and other feminist-inspired concerns.

Sponsored by Brooklyn Museum and Creative Time, it was a massive project, the idea being to “occupy” a block in Brooklyn and engage in intense, unscripted small-group dialogue as an unscripted “performance” in which we were not to break the 4th wall and engage the audience. On our practice day a week before the event, Lacy asked this question: “Where is the museum?” This was my favorite of the many questions asked and answered in connection with this event, in part, I think, because I had been asking myself: “Where is the classroom?” The community college classroom, specifically. How much and how committedly should that “classroom” be permitted to continue beyond that time-space or to be located elsewhere—in the streets of protest or the city-block of *Between the Door and the Street*, in co-curricular spaces privileging student voices or, simply, in my office?

Part of this is about the “baggage” of the classroom, the hierarchy of that space and the need—within higher education contexts—to shed it, or indeed to entirely *shred* it. That is, all the experiences our students have had in educational contexts before we meet them and endeavor to work with them. Part of it is about the critical acquisitions that often have a greater chance of coming to fruition outside the space of the classroom—acquisitions of voice and personal agency, the acquisition of a sense of oneself as a “smarty pants” person who belongs, fits in in a space where we read and debate the complex arguments of Aristotle and Marx, where we read and debate the complex tragedies of Will Shakespeare, Toni Morrison and Spike Lee. This is about the need to engage students outside the classroom in a way that brings them face-to-face with their agency, that *befriends* them to their own forceful voices. Leaving aside social contexts, which are obviously important, these are the critical acquisitions for long-term success and they are not givens when we live beneath the poverty line and at the color and class lines in situations

of a fully militarized, racist, elitist police force and an unjust system of crime and punishment. Success, in and of that journey, is deeper and bigger than (mere) knowledge, more primordial.

This means different things, in terms of the kinds of support services we need, in terms of the kind of campus we need to be, and in terms of pedagogies. For me, it has come to mean various things, chief among them engaging students in processes of social justice and community engagement through co-and extra-curricular involvements and simply as a citizen involved in social justice activism. Whatever the official rationale for Kingsborough's having become the first community college in the nation to mandate Civic Engagement as part of the two-year degree, I actively engage this in my work as a teacher not because of the graduation requirement but because of my personal understanding of the true role of community college faculty. This is something I try to do in a very particular way. Judith Rodin, former president of the University of Pennsylvania, now President of The Rockefeller Foundation, recently said: "You can't train your students to be civically engaged citizens going forward if you're not a civically engaged institution yourself."¹ Rodin was the first woman (feminist) to lead an Ivy League institution, and (perhaps uncoincidentally) *the* university president to transform U Penn into a civically engaged campus. Rodin took the school's leadership, in her words, "out of the ivory tower and into the streets," following an ethic in which they "no longer talked about what [they] would do *for*" the economically depressed community of West Philly but "what [they] would do *with* the community." Under her guidance, it was critical that participants—including her entire board—would work not in the frame of helper and "helpee" but approach social justice work in a truly communal, egalitarian spirit, seeing themselves and the residents of West Philly as members of a "network of mutuality," in MLK's phrase, working *together* to improve the conditions of life there.

There is an important translation of these ideas that applies to our work with our students. And this was the thing I realized over time: what Rodin describes as an institutional mandate also inheres, imposes itself, at the level of the individual instructor teaching civic education and engaging students civically. Increasingly, this type of pedagogy has come to define my teaching, the critical center of it being to leave the power in the hands of students, and, to do that not simply as a teacher of course content or research methods, but as a material participant in activism and organizing—in the classroom, in co-curricular work, *and* in the world beyond the borders of school. I've tried to embrace a non-hierarchical philosophy of empowerment and mutuality, like Rodin's, no longer thinking about what I would do *for* my students but about what I would do *with* them. In the time since completing my PhD, we've done a number of things together:

- *Between the Door and the Street*, mentioned earlier, was for me a stunning, deeply inspiring moment, in terms of myself as a teacher and as a feminist and simply as a woman. That this was something I did with four KCC students (as opposed to as part of another type of stoop dialogue) is something I deeply, truly cherish. (More on this later, including the handout.)
- We've also worked together as part of an on-campus activist group, the social justice collective called 99 Voices (formerly Occupy Kingsborough). We've organized three large-scale programs since 2012 in which students have been organizers, presenters, and staffers, the largest number having been part of the first event: "99 Voices for Trayvon Martin," a teach-in and public dialogue on institutional violence. There, we wanted to publicly mourn the deaths of slain victims like Martin, and so—led and organized by Farin Kautz—several students, hoodies up!, read out obituaries we'd written for twelve murder victims. They booked innumerable hours, getting commitments from a large group of students to manage

everything from videotaping and creating graphics and a mural, to advertising the event around campus and tabling, to being part of the event itself, reading the tributes, participating in the community dialogue, etc. This event went on for a whopping four and a half hours, landing me in big trouble with our facilities folks, and winding up being, according to Farin, the most important four hours spent in his time at Kingsborough. ... And incidentally, none of this happened as part of classroom work – it was simple (complex) campus activism.

- I've also collaborated with students a lot as Coordinator of KCC Reads, our common reading program. When I took that over, I did a number of things to engage students: I invited them into the program governance, inaugurated an Annual Student Conference and Fall mini-conference (where students present work completed on the book), and I launched a journal of student work, *Paideia*. (pass around stuff) This work has been massively important to me; it has entirely changed my experience of the teaching part of my job; and it has proved to me that my hunch about the need to both extend and transcend the classroom was right.
- I'm working now with panelists Anna Sacerdote and Jamila Wallace on multiple fronts, including social justice work they were inspired to take up of their own volition.
- Finally, I'm working with a few folks on campus now to start a Food Studies major or concentration at KCC. This came about through work done in KCC Reads / Common Reading in the 2013 – 14 academic year on *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer. (See the journal I passed around.) The response to the book was, in a word, phenomenal -- and it became quickly clear that there is much excitement on campus, particularly on the parts of students, around its issues. My fingers are crossed on this. Primarily because it will open many new avenues for students to civically engage around food justice, food agency and food education.

These are just a few of the things we're doing and have done; there is much more to talk about but I'll leave the summary there because I want to shore this up. ...The thing is, I don't know where these strands and pieces are leading, if anywhere. What will the moments of civic action I've participated in with Zanib and Farin and Dali and Anna and Jamila come to mean? Are we going to get Food Studies at Kingsborough? And if we do, will students be inspired to organize around food justice as I hope? I don't know. But that is actually what makes this work both feminist *and* pedagogically rich. That much of what we have done, are doing and will do is not prescribed by "teacher," and, that we didn't "do" a thing and then stop and declare it "done," "over." Rather it is a process pedagogy that unfolds in time and takes time, betrays itself in moments when students are moved to ACT -- *not* because we said "act," but because they said "Hey, let's act." It is about the crystallization of an embrace of personal private social political agency through being partnered as equals in urgent social and political processes, a pedagogy through which our students find their voices themselves, find *themselves* themselves, find themselves empowered in the world as socially active producers of change, harbingers of justice.

And *I* believe that if teaching was ever *really* supposed to be anything, if feminism was ever supposed to look like anything, it's that. The moment when Zanib Ahmad said what she said in our "after talk" following the Suzanne Lacy event (see HO). I asked the group how they felt about the experience having now completed it: were they glad to have done it, and why? The magic comes near the end when Zanib suggests that we take action beyond that Fall day in 2013 and carry the momentum and the dialogue and the feminism forward and the rest of us second her emotion. The suggested event has not happened yet; but the point is, it *might*... From that conversation (on the back), referring to the event just concluded, Zanib said:

Zanib: It's a great form of inspiration. **And I definitely recommend us doing the stoop project again with the school this time, and really get everyone involved.**

Dali: **That would be cool, we should.**

Brittany: **Like a women's conference.**

Maureen: **A women's speak out...**

Brittany: **Back home, we had like women conferences**, where all the women would dress in all white. The women would have a service where they would talk about the different things women go through. And then we could, like, invite guys to come to the thing, because, remember, we also talked [just then, in our stoop conversation] about if *they* really know the meaning of feminism. And so that would be a way to really understand what the word means.

Dali: **Knowledge is power.**

Indeed, Dali, knowledge *is* power – agency – voice: knowledge is the power—politically, juridically and socially—to ACT.

...Thank you.



~Notes:

¹ source: The Leonard Lopate Show, 1/12/15: <http://www.wnyc.org/story/building-resilience-and-bouncing-back/>