

**Teaching
Community**

A Pedagogy
of Hope

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rights and the new focus on critical race theory and practice, continues to push the notion that racist thinking, particularly in white minds, cannot be changed. This is just simply not true. Yet this false assumption gained momentum because there has been no collective demonstration on the part of masses of white people that they are ready to end race-based domination, especially when it comes to the everyday manifestation of white-supremacist thinking, of white power. Clearly, the most powerful indicator that white people wanted to see institutionalized racism end was the overall societal support for desegregation and integration. The fact that many white people did not link this support to ending everyday acts of white-supremacist thought and practice, however, has helped racism maintain its hold on our culture. To break that hold we need continual anti-racism activism. We need to generate greater cultural awareness of the way white-supremacist thinking operates in our daily lives. We need to hear from the individuals who know, because they have lived anti-racist lives, what everyone can do to decolonize their minds, to maintain awareness, change behavior, and create beloved community.

Teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom. Rather than embodying the conventional false assumption that the university setting is not the "real world" and teaching accordingly, the democratic educator breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real world experience, and our real life. Embracing the concept of a democratic education we see teaching and learning as taking place constantly. We share the knowledge gleaned in classrooms beyond those settings thereby working to challenge the construction of certain forms of knowledge as always and only available to the elite. When teachers support democratic education we automatically support widespread literacy. Ensuring literacy is the vital link between the public school system and university settings.

Democratic Education

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wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you." Parker adds to this declaration his own vital understanding that: "education at its best—this profound human transaction called teaching and learning—is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world." Since our place in the world is constantly changing, we must be constantly learning to be fully present in the now. If we are not fully engaged in the present we get stuck in the past and our capacity to learn is diminished.

Educators who challenge themselves to teach beyond the classroom setting, to move into the world sharing knowledge, learn a diversity of styles to convey information. This is one of the most valuable skills any teacher can acquire. Through vigilant practice we learn to use the language that can speak to the heart of the matter in whatever teaching setting we may find ourselves in. When college professors who are democratic educators share knowledge outside the classroom, the work we do dispels the notion that academic workers are out of touch with a world outside the hallowed halls of academe. We do the work of opening up the space of learning so that it can be more inclusive, and challenge ourselves constantly to strengthen our teaching skills. These progressive practices are vital to maintaining democratic education, both in the classroom and out. Authoritarian practices, promoted and encouraged by many institutions, undermines democratic education in the classroom. By undermining education as the practice of freedom, authoritarianism in the classroom dehumanizes and thus shuts down the "magic" that is always present when individuals are active learners. It takes the "fun out of study" and makes it repressive and oppressive. Authoritarian professors often

regards a diversity of style

All students are teachers too.

It is the public school that is the required schooling for everyone, that has the task of teaching students to read and write and hopefully to engage in some form of critical thinking. Everyone then who knows how to read and write has the tools needed to access higher learning even if that learning cannot and does not take place in a university setting. Our government mandates attendance at public school, thereby upholding public policy supporting democratic education. But the politics of class elitism ensure that biases in the way knowledge is taught often teach students in these settings that they are not deemed sophisticated learners if they do not attend college. This means that many students stop the practice of learning because they feel learning is no longer relevant to their lives once they graduate from high school unless they plan to attend college. They have often learned in public school both that college is not the "real" world and that the book learning offered there has no relevance in the world outside university walls. Even though all the knowledge coming from books in colleges is accessible to any reader/thinker whether they attend classes or not, tightly constructed class boundaries keep most high school graduates who are not enrolled in colleges from continued study. Even college students who receive undergraduate degrees leave college settings to enter the world of everyday work and tend to cease studying, basing their actions on the false assumption that book-based learning has little relevance in their new lives as workers. It is amazing how many college graduates never read a book again once they graduate. And if they read, they no longer study.

To bring a spirit of study to learning that takes place both in and beyond classroom settings, learning must be understood as an experience that enriches life in its entirety. Quoting from T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, Parker Palmer celebrates the wisdom Merlin the magician offers when he declares: "The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails . . . Learn why the world

knowledge in other settings. When educational settings become places that have as their central goal the teaching of bourgeois manners, vernacular speech and languages other than standard English are not valued. Indeed, they are blatantly devalued. While acknowledging the value of standard English the democratic educator also values diversity in language. Students who speak standard English, but for whom English is a second language, are strengthened in their bilingual self-esteem when their primary language is validated in the classroom. This valuation can occur as teachers incorporate teaching practices that honor diversity, resisting the conventional tendency to maintain dominator values in higher education.

Certainly as democratic educators we have to work to find ways to teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination (those of race, gender, class, and religious hierarchies). Diversity in speech and presence can be fully appreciated as a resource enhancing any learning experience. In recent years we have all been challenged as educators to examine the ways in which we support, either consciously or unconsciously, existing structures of domination. And we have all been encouraged by democratic educators to become more aware, to make more conscious choices. We may unwittingly collude with structures of domination because of the way learning is organized in institutions. Or we may gather material to teach that is non-biased and yet present it in a manner that is biased, thus reinforcing existing oppressive hierarchies.

Without ongoing movements for social justice in our nation, progressive education becomes all the more important since it may be the only location where individuals can experience support for acquiring a critical consciousness, for any commitment to end domination. The two movements for social justice that have had the most transformative impact on our culture are anti-racist struggle and feminist movement. Understanding that the movement for activism often slows down once civil rights

invest in the notion that they are the only "serious" teachers, whereas democratic educators are often stereotyped by their more conservative counterparts as not as rigorous or as without standards. This is especially the case when the democratic educator attempts to create a spirit of joyful practice in the classroom. In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Paulo Freire contends that democratic educators "must do everything to ensure an atmosphere in the classroom where teaching, learning, and studying are serious acts, but also ones that generate happiness." Explaining further he states: "Only to an authoritarian mind can the act of educating be seen as a dull task. Democratic educators can only see the acts of teaching, of learning, of studying as serious, demanding tasks that not only generate satisfaction but are pleasurable in and of themselves. The satisfaction with which they stand before the students, the confidence with which they speak, the openness with which they listen, and the justice with which they address the students' problems make the democratic educator a model. Their authority is affirmed without disrespect of freedom. . . . Because they respect freedom, they are respected." Democratic educators show by their habits of being that they do not engage in forms of socially acceptable psychological splitting wherein someone teaches only in the classroom and then acts as though knowledge is not meaningful in every other settings. When students are taught this, they can experience learning as a whole process rather than a restrictive practice that disconnects and alienates them from the world.

Conversation is the central location of pedagogy for the democratic educator. Talking to share information, to exchange ideas is the practice both inside and outside academic settings that affirms to listeners that learning can take place in varied time frames (we can share and learn a lot in five minutes) and that knowledge can be shared in diverse modes of speech. Whereas vernacular speech may seldom be used in the classroom by teachers it may be the preferred way to share

capitalist patriarchy were truth, began to consider the reality of biases, and to discuss the value of inclusion. Yet many people supported inclusion only when diverse ways of knowing were taught as subordinate and inferior to the superior ways of knowing informed by Western metaphysical dualism and dominant culture. To counter this distorted approach to inclusion and diversity, democratic educators have stressed the value of

pluralism. In the essay "Commitment and Openness: A Contemplative Approach to Pluralism," Judith Simmer-Brown explains: "pluralism is not diversity. Diversity is a fact of modern life—especially in America. There are tremendous differences in our communities—ethnically, racially, religiously. Diversity suggests the fact of such differences. Pluralism, on the other hand, is a response to the fact of diversity. In pluralism, we commit to engage with the other person or the other community. Pluralism is a commitment to communicate with and relate to the larger world—with a very different neighbor, or a distant community." Many educators embrace the notion of diversity while resisting pluralism or any other thinking that suggests that they should no longer uphold dominant culture.

Affirmative action was aimed at creating greater diversity and it was, at least in theory, a positive practice of reparations, providing access to those groups who had previously been denied education and other rights because of group-based oppression. Despite its many flaws, affirmative action successfully broke barriers to gender and racial inclusion, benefiting white women especially. As our schools became more diverse, professors were often challenged to the core of their being. Old ideas of studying and learning other people's work in order to find our own theories and defend them were and are being constantly challenged. Judith Simmer-Brown offers the useful insight that this mode of learning does not allow us to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty. She contends: "As educators, one of the best things that we can do for our students is to not force them into holding theories and solid concepts but

are won, both these movements worked to created locations for academic study precisely so that an unbiased approach to scholarship and learning would not only be legitimized in school and university settings, but would act as a catalyst to transform every academic discipline. Learning would then serve to educate students for the practice of freedom rather than the maintenance of existing structures of domination.

All the progressive study of race and gender taking place in university settings has had meaningful impact way beyond the academic classroom. Democratic educators who championed bringing an end to biased ways of teaching bridged the gap between the academic and the so called "real" world. Long before progressive scholars became interested in race or gender and diversity or multiculturalism, big business recognized the need to teach workers—particularly the deal makers, whose task was to create new markets around the world—about difference, about other cultures. Of course the foundation of this approach was not teaching to end domination but rather teaching to further the interests of the marketplace, but conservatives and liberals alike clearly recognized the necessity of teaching students in this nation perspectives that included a recognition of different ways of knowing. In the wake of this shift, generated by capitalist concerns to maintain power in a global marketplace, anti-racist and anti-sexist advocates were able to lobby successfully for challenging the ways imperialist notions of white supremacy, of nationalism, had created biases in educational material and in the teaching styles and strategies of educators.

Academic discourse, both written and spoken, on the subject of race and racism, on gender and feminism, made a major intervention, linking struggles for justice outside the academy with ways of knowing within the academy. This was really revolutionary. Educational institutions that had been founded on principles of exclusion—the assumption that the values that uphold and maintain imperialist white-supremacist

For more than thirty years I have witnessed students who do not want to be educated to be oppressors come close to graduation—and then sabotage themselves. They are the students who turn away from school with just one semester or one course to finish before they graduate. Sometimes they are brilliant graduate students who just never write their dissertations. Afraid that they will not be able to keep the faith, to become democratic educators, afraid that they will enter the system and *become* it, they turn away. Competitive education rarely works for students who have been socialized to value working for the good of the community. It rends them, tearing them apart. They experience levels of disconnection and fragmentation that destroy all pleasure in learning. These are the students who most need the guiding influence of democratic educators.

Forging a learning community that values wholeness over division, disassociation, splitting, the democratic educator works to create closeness. Palmer calls it the “intimacy that does not annihilate difference.” As a student who came to undergraduate and graduate education by way of the radical movements for social justice that had opened space that had been closed, I learned to take community where I found it, bonding across race, gender, class, religious experience in order to save and protect the part of myself that wanted to stay in an academic world, that wanted to choose an intellectual life. The bonds I forged were with the individuals who, like myself, valued learning as an end itself and not as a means to reach another end, class mobility, power, status. We were the folks who knew that whether we were in an academic setting or not, we would continue to study, to learn, to educate.

rather to actually encourage the process, the inquiry involved, and the times of not knowing—with all of the uncertainties that go along with that. This is really what supports going deep. This is openness.” While I was working with professors at a leading liberal arts college to help them unlearn dominant models of education, I heard white males voice their feelings of fear and uncertainty about giving up models they knew. The males were willing to accept the challenge to transform and yet were fearful because they simply did not know what would be the source of their power if they were no longer relying on a racialized gendered notion of authority to maintain that power. Their honesty helped all of us imagine and articulate what the positive outcomes of a pluralist approach to learning might be.

One of the most positive outcomes is a commitment to “radical openness,” the will to explore different perspectives and change one’s mind as new information is presented. Throughout my career as a democratic educator I have known many brilliant students who seek education, who dream of service in the cause of freedom, who despair or become fundamentally dismayed because colleges and universities are structured in ways that dehumanize, that lead them away from the spirit of community in which they long to live their lives. More often than not, these students, especially gifted students of color from diverse class backgrounds, give up hope. They do poorly in their studies. They take on the mantle of victimhood. They fail. They drop out. Most of them have had no guides to teach them how to find their way in educational systems that, though structured to maintain domination, are not closed systems and therefore have within them subcultures of resistance where education as the practice of freedom still happens. Way too many gifted students never find these subcultures, never encounter the democratic educators who could help them find their way. They lose heart.