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Performative Pedagogy, At-Risk Students, and the Basic Course: Fourteen Moments in Search of Possibility

John T. Warren

ONE

I had been sitting in a large carpeted room across campus, doing some ethnographic observations for a research project on whiteness. The instructor and I were studying how these (mostly) white students studying whiteness, culture, and education would talk about and enact whiteness even as it was the very subject matter of the course. The class was, for the most part, progressing. They had been talking about this work for almost seven weeks, reading articles and engaging in class conversation about what it means to be white in a world coded with white privilege. After class one day, the instructor approached me and asked if I would be willing to teach next week, noting that, while I was the silent observer, taking field notes and trying to get a grasp on what folks were saying in conversation, she had to be at a conference and was hoping that I could take on the task of this one class. I thought about it, remembering how each and every class had pretty much gone the same way: class began, conversations slowly started, people presented articles, class members
talked, class ended. This system, while engaging stu-
dents in complex thoughts, asking them to critically
think about their own implication in systems of racism,
did not provide any space for students to engage this
material in any other way.

When I entered class the next week, I desired two
basic things, both of them forming the basis for my
pedagogy—a performative pedagogy: First, I wanted
students to see their communicative acts as performa-
tive. That is, I wanted them to see racial identity and
racism as an on-going process of formation, not as static
and unchanging (Butler, 1993; Warren, 2001). Second, I
wanted students to get to that theoretical perspective
through their own performing bodies (Pineau, 1994). I
wanted them to perform, to move these concepts and
ideas into their flesh. Such a knowing, I hoped, would
change them.

I began by breaking students into groups and asked
them to create a list of those issues that still plagued
them. They did, and together we compiled a master list
on the board. Then I grouped those issues into five main
categories. Based on those, I divided the 20 students
into five groups and asked each group to create a per-
formance that tried to embody the issue—to pose a
problem derived from that particular point of interest.
For instance, one group struggled with trying to find a
balance in their own personal self negotiation between
the power of privilege and the desire to bring about
change. A white woman, arms outstretched between two
other people, became the rope in a tug-of-war. On the
left was “Howard,” a black man, who spoke of resis-
tance: “You can do it. Keep going!” On the right,
“Sophia,” a white woman, was the embodiment of privi-
A dear friend of mine loves to make collages. She takes magazine pictures, ink stamps, phrases from academic texts, and other collected images and places them all next to each other, creating something new from things already experienced. The images sometimes refer to each other, while other times they constitute a question, a puzzle that demands I search out meaning from within my own life experiences. What I love about her art is that what I get is both a product of her critical and creative energies, while still existing as a space for my own thoughts and ideas. From her effort, I can make
different kinds of meanings, my own meanings within the collection of fragments she provides. Thus, I often bring my own understandings to the art and through that interaction, I discover new things about me—new ways of thinking about the ideas or arguments in the image as well as new ways of thinking about constructing art in ways that produce new possibilities. It is an art form that is interactional like no other—it is an art form like stained glass or a tile mosaic in which meaning is co-constructed through moments of engagement. Her art challenges me in very productive ways.

Her care and energy along the line of research and teaching, as well as her incessant assertion that both can be captured through collage, has influenced my thinking about how I might talk about my interests in performative pedagogy, at-risk students, and the basic course. As a new director of a basic communication course, dealing with curriculum matters and students in need, I am growing more and more convinced that the images in my mind—the fragments of meaning, the scraps of experience, and the moments of critical scholarship I have read and written—can best be articulated through a collage. That is, I think a collage of these moments, these insights, these images from the basic course, might very well make for a critical conversation that begins to address the promise and limitations of performative pedagogy in the basic course for addressing issues such as "at-risk-ness." Thomas P. Brockelman (2001) argues that "collage intends to represent the intersection of multiple discourses" (p. 2). Perhaps through a juxtaposition of experiences and theory, we might each step back from this collage—my collage—and search out meaning and possibility. Such a mean-
Performative Pedagogy

ingful interaction with this assembled text demands co-participation between author and reader through a collaged narrative.

The value of the collage as an art is also a nice metaphor for my understandings of performativity. That is, just as the collage allows for a productive meaning making process to take place, performativity, as a theoretical framework, is centered on how individuals work to productively make meaning in their worlds. Butler (1990) argues that performativity is about social constitution—it is about how we use the discursive codes and material to shape and reproduce the ideologies that shape and regulate social and bodily norms. This is to say, identities like gender are not performed in a vacuum, but rather through a bringing together and reproducing of the historical ideals we, as gendered beings, were born into. Thus, Butler (1990) reminds us of Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the body “is an historical idea,” not a “natural species” (p. 271). In this way, our identities are not radically individualized; rather, identities are products of reproduction in which the repetitive acts we engage in (ways of sitting, walking, talking, etc.) work to recreate the very idea of gender. Butler’s (1990) notion of performativity allows us to see the power of the collage—that art form that is constituted through a bringing together of historically informed and socially meaningful discursive codes and material to shape and reflect back on the ideologies that have made us who we are.

This collage, this performative interaction of meaning making, is an attempt to produce and invoke conversation about performative pedagogy—a pedagogy based in the principles of performativity, valuing consti-
Performative Pedagogy

tution over naturalization, participation over dominance. This collage is a putting together of experiences and observations, critical commentary, scholarly research, and images of education. This collage represents an effort to re-theorize the process of education and how that process marks and recreates identities. Further, the site of the basic communication course is important for never has there been a course that can introduce alternative ways of experiencing education than introductory communication basic courses—courses in which participation and meaning making are already so central.

THREE

It was years ago when I was a graduate student—a new Assistant Director of the Basic Course. It was years ago, but I can still remember the musty smell of that damp basement classroom in the university library.

The room was a dark, small, rectangular space carved out of the basement of the library. I was asked to be there by the instructor, a small, young, thin woman with long blond hair and fair skin highlighted by bright red lipstick. I had been the Assistant Director of the Basic Course for almost eight months and had never been asked to observe a class by an instructor who felt like she might be in danger, at risk. I sat in the center of the room, along the back wall in order to be able to see all the students. The dim bulbs above flickered, humming a white noise that lured my own body to sleepiness, even while my heart was beating loudly against my ribcage as I nervously waited for him to arrive. “Bruce” entered,
wearing a faded gray T-shirt with a hard rock logo from the eighties and torn blue jeans exposing his dirty white shins to anyone who cared to look. He sat in the far right corner of the room, leaning back in his desk. The instructor began, asking students to fill out index cards with their speech topics for the final persuasive round.

This, however, was not the first time I had met Bruce. I met him first in print, having read three essays the instructor provided me as an introduction. Each of them featuring a shade of violence and instability, each scary in its own way. In one, he analyzes an argument with his instructor—this young female instructor now under my supervision, now needing my care—where he calls her a “fucking bitch” who he “hates.” Each essay detailed an obsession with drugs, death, and suicide.

But as I looked at him, he looked pretty harmless, sitting there staring outward in what I have guessed to be a doped fuzziness. The instructor, I would later learn, read his desired speech topics: “Drugs—for it. Homosexuality—for it.” She didn’t respond, but looked at me. I could see she was afraid, knowing that this student represented a fear for her—each interaction coded with the desire to make her second guess his motives. In a later meeting with the student, the Director of the Basic Course, and myself, the student appeared so drugged he couldn’t seem to follow the conversation. Between the drug use, the threats of violence, the vague mentioning of topics that are being used to surprise and disturb the instructor, and the constant presence of hostility, this instructor desperately needed space from this student. And as the course supervisors, we had to search out ways of rendering him harmless, regardless of the risk to his own desires.
The first time I ever heard the construct 'at-risk student' I was talking with a colleague before the first day of class. I was in graduate school taking a doctoral seminar on communication education that looked at "special populations" in the communication classroom. Students with disabilities, communicatively apprehensive students, and at-risk students formed the basis for our course. Before class, I asked my friend about the notion of "at-risk," noting that it seemed pretty self-explanatory—that is, at-risk students must be those in schools who are at-risk of failure. She told me that I was pretty much correct, explaining that there was even a special commission in our field whose sole purpose was to examine the needs of students who were academically at-risk.

Barbara Presseisen (1988) discusses and critiques one of the major trends in this writing: "cultural deprivation" (p. 27). She notes that many scholars label students at-risk when they lack the cultural or social opportunity to learn. Thus, programs like Upward Bound and Head Start are created and funded in order to 'fix' the problem. An example of this kind of scholarship can be found in the work of Glenda Gill (1992) who notes that at-risk students are "communication cripples" (p. 225). In both these works, the researchers seek to identify issues with those students who fail and find ways of either changing the 'crippled' student, or altering the educational process in order to accommodate for these failures. On a slightly different tack, Genevieve Johnson (1994) argues that the problem is with the differences
between home and school, in which differing ways of interacting lead to (or create the possibility of) educational risk. In all these approaches, scholars seek to explain why students are at-risk.

This was my first meeting of at-risk as an educational concept. And when I entered my first classroom as a teacher, I found myself searching for who might be the one, the one at-risk. Which one might have the "cultural deprivation," the incongruity between home and school, the problem? And in that look, in searching for these students in this way, I became part of the process of educational gate keeping. I became, in my effort to find those people, one of the ones who got to decide if a student was or was not at-risk. I was doing, in a sense, what people had asked me to do—I was finding the problems. And once I found them, I would try to fix them. Isn't that what I was supposed to do?

FIVE

In a recent book review essay on performative pedagogy, I called for critical performative pedagogy to operate along two axes: a performative mode of analysis and a performative mode of engagement (Warren, 1999). My vision in that essay was to define at least two modes of performative knowing: First, to have teachers see performance as a way of conceptualizing identity. That is, I want educational agents to move from a static notion of race, class, sexuality and gender to a view of identity as an historical construction that is not just socially constructed in the here and now. My argument was that the books I was reviewing were just starting to really
see the body as a performative accomplishment that carried with it the sedimented constructs of privilege, power, and domination from millions of minute acts in the past. Thus, when we talk of people, we are talking about strategic processes that continually work to maintain the illusion of naturalness (Butler, 1993). I believe that a performative mode of analysis can shift the ground in introductory communication courses. I believe that looking at communication as a constitutive way of seeing identity—of demanding that students see their everyday communication as part of a larger process that works to maintain and produce power—makes all people newly accountable. Across many campuses, introductory communication courses are viewed simply as skills courses. I am reminded of this every year when my introductory students levy the following complaints: There's too much writing in this speaking course! Why do we have to know all this theory? What does this have to do with public speaking? The move to performativity—the connection of communicative discourse in all forms to power and identity constitution—means that our students will come to see communicative interaction as effect-causing in ways not yet realized in many basic courses. The ground shifts as students find connections between their everyday communication and the social and political relationships across the globe. Performative modes of analysis means that rather than seeing things as they are, students will look at the means of production, questioning how things got to be that way in the first place.

Second, I wanted teachers to engage in course material through a performative mode of engagement—“a methodology of engaging in education that acknowl-
edges bodies and the political nature of their presence in our classrooms" (Warren, 1999, p. 258). Thus, putting the material on its feet and into our bodies was, for me, a key component of critical performative pedagogy. It is to make intellectual content material theories of the flesh—a moving of schooling into a process of the body, a “body [that] both incorporates ideas and generates” the very structures and identities we take for granted (McLaren, 1991, p. 144, his emphasis). Performative modes of engagement are already a major part of most introductory communication courses. The communication discipline has long advocated experiential learning, returning to the notion that in the doing, our students come to know in more meaningful ways. The late Wallace A. Bacon (1987) probably said it best: Performance “is a form of knowing—not just a skill for knowing, but a knowing” (p. 73). Public, physical engagement has long been the hallmark of communication classes, asking students to move into speech, presentation, and performance spaces in order to engage critical issues with multiple faculties. However, while our basic communication courses demand public demonstration of knowledge, we, as a discipline, still need to develop critical tools for academic engagement with our theories. That is, how might the learning that is necessary for the public speech, performance, or other presentation be learned through our bodies? How might the basic principles of nonverbal communication, communication norms, perception, and other concepts in our courses be examined through students’ active bodies? To continue to ask students to move from their desks and into their bodies is to again shift learning to perform-
Performative Pedagogy

ance—to demand engagement in multiple and viscerally immediate ways.

Thinking back, I would probably include a call for a performative mode of critique—a critique of and through the flesh that creates a dialogic and heuristic way of engaging in students’ work. This would both make critique a method of the body, where an instructor calls upon the mode of performance as a way of talking back to students’ work, while also using performativity as a way of speaking toward the construct brought by the student. It would, as Alexander (1999) has suggested, take on a “poetic” nature, where the “breath of life” is brought back to the “process of pedagogical critique” (p. 108). To ask students to engage in creative and critical ways means that instructors should honor that work and provide reciprocal forms of commentary. What would it mean to have students, after a performance/speech round get back into the space with the instructor—to have the instructor rework, rethink, re-physicalize the moment? How might learning change? How might poetic commentaries on the creative work of students alter their understandings? The times I’ve experimented with these forms of critique, I have been impressed with the responses from the students. Students can be touched by the attention their work receives.

To change education in these ways is to ask students and teachers to take the principles of education (learning content, building skills, promoting intellectual development) and the principles of critical pedagogy (undermining hegemony, questioning power structures, seeking social change) and bring them together to the site of the body. As Elyse Pineau (1998) writes:
Performative Pedagogy is more than a philosophical orientation or set of classroom practices. It is a location, a way of situating one’s self in relation to students, to colleagues, and to the institutional polices and traditions under which we all labor. Performance Studies scholars and practitioners locate themselves as embodied researchers: listening, observing, reflecting, theorizing, interpreting, and representing human communication through the medium of their own and other’s experiencing bodies. (p. 130)

A critical, performative pedagogy asks students and teachers to be embodied researchers—to take learning to the body in order to come to know in a more full and powerful way. It is to liberate the body from the shackles of a dualism that privileges the mind over the visceral. It is to ask students to be more fully present, to be more fully engaged, to take more responsibility and agency in their own learning.

SIX

When I was in grade school, I always got C’s in conduct. I couldn’t quietly sit still for the whole day without erupting with energy. I would talk to my neighbor, fidget, draw, or otherwise distract the teacher or other students, calling for reprimand or overt punishment. I once had to sit on “The Bench” at recess for my excess energy during class. I suppose today I would be a good candidate for Ritalin—a child that could only learn if he wasn’t so hyperactive, so energetic, so bodily. But when I see my niece being accused of the same kinds of behaviors I had growing up and I see my relatives arguing with the school in an effort to avoid drugging a nine
year old girl who happens to be bored in school and yearns to do something with her excess energy, I think about how I could have lived my childhood years in a drugged induced docility—backgrounding the body or creating its perceptual absence by medical means. As Foucault (1977) so poignantly reminds us, “a disciplined body is the prerequisite of an efficient gesture” (p. 152). The good student is the one who sits still, keeps in place, does not speak out of turn. Yet, when I see my niece, I know she is not abnormal. She is bored. She is tried of sitting, tired of being talked at, tired of being the empty receptacle into which her teacher dumps knowledge.

And so was I. I remember sitting in class, staring up at the large maple trees planted outside the windows of my fifth grade classroom. I remember wishing I could fly, fly away into the bright blue skies far above the looming shadows of that maple tree. I remember wanting to get away from that room, those hard plastic-coated metal chairs. I remember wanting to escape.

SEVEN

There are notable others who have written on performative approaches to education and I would be remiss if I failed to mention them.

In Peter McLaren’s (1993) powerful ethnography of Toronto schools, he describes how schooling works to reconstitute identities through schooling practice. Like Paul Willis (1977) before him, McLaren (1993) looks at how schools that have predominately working class students maintain and reconstitute the very ideologies and
myths of class that have plagued working class people's educational experiences. Thus, McLaren (1993) found schools, through educational rituals and lowered expectations, maintained particular kinds of work ethics and provided a curriculum that steered students from certain class backgrounds into similar lines of work; hegemony, instituted through educational rituals, "creates an ideology pervasive and potent enough to penetrate the level of common sense and suffuse society through taken-for-granted rules of discourse" (p. 84). In this way, the process of education is a performative process—a process that helps to (re)constitute educational identities.

bell hooks (1994), critical/cultural critic, imagines education as the practice of freedom. She argues for a "progressive, holistic education" in which we strive for an "engaged pedagogy" that "is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy" (p. 15). She believes education should take into account the "mind, body, and spirit" (p. 16). In this way, the whole body of the student—the mental, spiritual, and the physical—join together to make learning an experience of the body where we mix senses and thought, creating a holistic practice that undermines the mind/body split so entrenched in our educational practice (p. 191).

Jane Gallop (1995), in an introduction to a fascinating collection of essays, describes teaching as an act of "im-personation" in which teaching always falls in the "knot of pretense and reality" (p. 16). In her conception of teaching, we, as teachers, are always in the liminal space of the "me" and the "not-me"—always a process of identity construction which is both based on acts before (of self and others in the teaching arena) and the con-
tinual imagining of who we might become (a process of materializing a possibility). We are, in the classroom, in the process of negotiating our identities in/through our performance(s) of teacher.

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997) argues the following:

Performative pedagogy makes claims not to Truth and validity, but to viability and efficacy in relation to a particular audience and intention within a particular situation. It strives not for Truth, but political and social response-ability, credibility, and usefulness-in-context, and in relation to its particular ‘audience’ of students. (p. 162)

Here, Ellsworth frames the purpose of education as a process of intersubjectivity, particularity, and contingency. That is, knowledge, like identity, becomes a journey that is mapped in the doing, through the efforts of the classroom community. Knowledge, content, and curriculum become a meaningful negotiation where students understand not only what one should know, but how one comes to know.

Henry A. Giroux and Patrick Shannon (1997) note that performative pedagogy’s usefulness lies, at least in part, on its suggestions of hope:

this [pedagogical approach] suggests the necessity for cultural workers to develop dynamic, vibrant, politically engaged, and socially relevant projects in which traditional binarisms of margin/center, unity/difference, local/national, and public/private can be reconstituted through more complex representations of identification, belonging, and community. (p. 8)

Thus, performative pedagogy is a mode of change, a mode of possibility—through this mode of classroom praxis, one can imagine new ways of constituting our
work, our lives, and our political possibilities. It is the realm of hope that performative pedagogy can undermine the strictures that have so hindered our abilities to imagine new ways of engaging our students.

EIGHT

The other day a student accused me of “teaching politics.” He couched the insinuation in such a way as to suggest that my teaching style reflected a “socialist political agenda”—that I “was very one-sided” in my educational choices. From my selection of the course textbook, articles, and other materials, this student rightly argued that my choices were informed by a particular ideology. Although I willingly accepted his charges, ready to have a conversation in class about politics and education, I admit that I first felt a bit confused. Indeed, I am no stranger to the inevitable connection between education and politics, but I had never been called a socialist, nor did I necessarily see myself advocating such a position. However, the “social nature” of my content choices stood out next to his own political orientation that he openly and competently argued in class: radical individualism. My choices read very political in his eyes—eyes that look at the world from a very different experiential perspective.

But this is not about my choices in that class, nor is it about how education is a political enterprise. Rather, this is about awareness, for in that moment a student reminded me of what happens when teachers allow students to critically engage the material. Because I prefaced the class on the first day with the recommendation
that they vocally engage the class material, I made space for a conversation about my pedagogy in that classroom—a conversation sometimes ignored in education. My own schooling vividly taught me that politics were always at play, often reifying the status-quo, while denying my dissenting voice. I recall a “Major English Authors” course where the syllabus only reflected the work done by men and, when asked, the professor abruptly noted that the class focused on major English authors. So politics (what gets put in, what is left out, who is privileged and who is neglected) is always already a part of educational practice. But schooling often ignores the recognition of the power the instructor has in shaping how education happens.

The political conversation we had in class that day—both this student’s assertion of my socialist nature, as well as my eagerness to accept that claim and problematize the educational process—shifted, I think, the nature of our classroom toward the performative. Through our conversation, I hope we changed direction away from my student’s claim about the nature of my particular classroom, to the broad process of creating the very idea of a classroom. We talked about curriculum, we talked about communicative rules and how power is asserted through space and ritual, we talked about the current charge by conservative politicians that education needs more standardization and more accountability, and we talked about the very impossibility of creating classrooms without ideology. Further, I reminded them that because I admit my politics (which I framed as critical, noting my commitment to anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-heterosexist classroom discourse), I hoped they would all ask themselves about
those teachers in their past who never acknowledged their own commitments. I gave the students a new assignment that day—they were to analyze the politics of their other classes, asking themselves what is being promoted and maintained without acknowledgement. My hope was to shift from the naturalized assumption that education should strive toward neutrality to a space where they saw the constitutive nature of education as a process of political and ideological choices. It was the power of a performative mode of analysis that made possible a conversation that, for one semester, made the basic course a space of critical inquiry. On the final exam, students were able to analyze situations on the level of the constitutive, moving toward a complex understanding of communicative behaviors. It turned a critique against me personally, into an opportunity for learning.

NINE

A performative mode of analysis will tell me that the bodies and minds of those labeled “at-risk” is a fiction. It is an illusion that has been created over time and has, for many, including those who come to claim that identity, gained the appearance of substance or naturalness. Listening to some who write on “at-risk,” we might forget that these identities are created: Frymier, et. al. (1992), argue that risk is a predictable measure that can be based on students educational experiences; Chesebro, et al. (1992), argue that risk is a product of external locus of control; and Johnson (1994) says risk is a communication contradiction between differing systems in
education (i.e., between the students and schooling, the schooling process and family, etc.). As Deanna L. Fassett (1999) notes, these naturalized constructions often take the shape of either metaphors of epidemiology (diagnosis in the medicalized sense) or ecology (conflict between child and environment). Thus, they appear to be a natural consequence of either the student who lacks some quality or characteristic that might enable success in school, or the student who fails because communication across the divides between school and home are too different.

A performative mode of analysis might question the naturalness in these constructions, asking questions about how these constructs were made in the first place. It is a different kind of question, moving from the immediacy of the student here and now to the structure that generated the possibility of their failure. It is to say that rather than simply acknowledging the incredulity between home and school (especially for people of color), one must first ask about how this structure that we call education was generated and maintained. Our systems of schooling are very much a product of European based education, a training of bodies and minds to be docile receptacles waiting to be filled by teacher-experts (Foucault, 1977; Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994; Shor, 1992). McLaren (1993) argues that “there is a distinct Eros denying quality about school life, as if students were discarnate beings, unsullied by the taint of living flesh. [. . .] [S]tudents put their bodies symbolically ‘on hold’ upon entering the school at the beginning of the day” (p. 221). Chris Amirault (1995) notes that the ideal of a “good” student is a reproductive construct—teachers, judged successful in their educational paths, continue to
privilege the same qualities, reconstituting the categories and behaviors of success. So, if we can say that our schools privilege particular kinds of bodies (white, able-bodied, male, etc.) that perform in particular ways (docile, seated, absent-bodied, etc.), then might we also conclude that the construct of who is 'at-risk' in those classrooms might also be a construction? And if we say this, then what might be the implications for how one engages in the practice of education?

TEN

It is my first time in the lecture hall as the official professor for this "basic" communication course and my hands glisten with the dampness produced from nervous sweat. I wipe them on my pant legs, my shirt, a small packet of tissues in my pocket—all in an attempt to wipe away the nervousness I feel in this space, the terror of these 300 pairs of eyes on me. This room makes me sweat. This context makes me sweat. My eyes sweep across the bodies of my new students, only one-third the 900 total population in this (my) introductory course. As I look at them, I think back to my own college experience. I only had one lecture course in my own education—a room of 50 bored general education students staring at the geology professor as he talked about the differences between this rock and that. I imagine for many of these 300 students, I am that teacher. I am the one talking incessantly about things that do not matter, as much as I try to say otherwise, in their lives. This fact—this location as the bringer of boredom—makes me shiver, makes me cringe, and makes my hands
sweat. And the fact that I know my hatred of this room is personal—my own construction and my own pedagogical allegiances to interactive and embodied learning—makes me sweat, for I know that my resistance to this space will make this classroom situation all the more difficult for all of us.

Wiping my hands on my new brown slacks, I ask a question. This is my attempt to undermine what I feel is the teacher-centered, anti-dialogic nature of this classroom space. This is my attempt to create a sense of the process oriented focus of my class. It was just a simple question, posed for consideration to 300 students who couldn’t care less. Who just wanted to go, to go home—they knew this subjective question about power, culture, and pedagogy wouldn’t be on the multiple-choice, mass produced and computer graded test. They knew this was pointless, for they are only there to get the notes, to take the test, to pass, to move on, move on to more important things. I am an obstacle here, only an obstacle. I wipe my hands again as the persistent perspiration continues.

They look, these 300 student faces. They look at me and are silent. They don’t help me out and I stand there, mocked by their silence. And it is my fault, for I invite this mocking—it is my attempt to allow the structure to become apparent, to allow the constraints of this room to become evident to all. This room, with its computerized video projection equipment, with its bolted-down desks, with its molded chairs—each of which are designed for some mythical, idealized other who fits its image, with its stadium incline, with its stage from which I spout knowledge to this sleeping audience, all mocks me. And I ask them to do so. I ask them to do so
in order that the structure, the communication norms, all shed the normalcy engrained on us by our schooling histories. I ask them to question this situation. I ask them to question me, my place, my power. And when they mock me, I hope they see that it is the system I am asking them to mock. But as I stand there, my body only feels the mocking as it injures my sense of self, the self who hates this room, this situation, this gross injustice upon the bodies of my new students. And it makes my hands sweat—they sweat because I have offered my body up as the site of critique. My hands sweat because I know that, by standing there in front of this room, I am the representative of the educational system that renders them the passive, bored, and sleeping student. I am the paradox of tradition and critique. This paradox injures me. And I suspect it injures them, the sleeping students who know the rules, knows that soon the overhead, the notes, will appear and give them the key, the answers for the exam.

My hands sweat because I am, after all, a paradox they know all too well.

ELEVEN

Critical performative pedagogy redefines risk. By this I mean to suggest that critical performative pedagogy alters how students inhabit educational spaces to such an extent that traditional notions of ‘at-risk’ cease to matter in the same ways. Students in this environment encounter educational material through the mediums of their minds, bodies, and spirit, asking for reflexively visceral participation. Students who enter
the classroom with their bodies already present (via color, ability, age, gender, sexuality, etc.) are positioned differently. That is, their body is no longer to be feared and erased, but embraced as a site of critical interrogation and reflection. Additionally, those bodies that are always already absent through educational discipline and naturalization will no longer feel the effacement of schooling. Rather, the body is re-enfleshed in the classroom through a pedagogy that re-marks and remakes educational subjectivities in an effort to acknowledge the invisible forces of privilege and domination that dwell in absence. Together, educational bodies (students and teachers) enter the site of learning on contingent, shifting ground. From that unstable ground of critique, learning can be established in a cooperative and passionate engagement.

Critical performative pedagogy creates risk. By this I mean to suggest that critical performative pedagogy alters how students inhabit educational spaces to such an extent that traditional notions of 'at-risk' cease to matter in the same ways. And while this unstable ground is a productive space of inquiry, one should acknowledge that educative practices that are body-centered and critically community-based are currently not the norm in schooling. This means that when a student enters my classroom where I ask for bodily engagement, students may be rightly skeptical and educationally unprepared for this kind of intellectual labor. Many times when I conduct workshops on whiteness, I begin with a brief discussion on performative pedagogy, noting that I am working against a mind-centered pedagogical bias. I acknowledge that the moving of ideas to the body, a shift many of them consider a large and incom-
prehensible leap, demands that they be willing to try and locate learning within their own experiencing bodies. When I foreground Pineau’s (1994) framing of performative pedagogy, calling for a schooling practice that offers poetics, play, process, and power, I put students who would normally be comfortable in classrooms at risk by changing the rules. And while I suspect that everyone would gain from a pedagogy that recognizes the whole educational subject, I am very much aware that such a practice puts students at risk.

TWELVE

I remember sitting in the small dim room of the basement thinking to myself, “What in the hell are you going to do about people like Bruce?” Bruce is indeed a conundrum for critical performative pedagogy. He represents the worst fear of many instructors. Is he a predator? Is he violent? Is the instructor at-risk of harm in that class? How has she already been damaged from this experience? What do we do with students who usurp power in the classroom in order to instigate fear?

My first reaction to this dilemma is to turn the question around and ask, what has happened in Bruce’s education (as well as his everyday life) to cause this kind of disruption? What kind of needs does he have (for attention, for power, for help) that make possible the behaviors we see? What has education done to his body in the past that make this the place for his assertions of power to manifest? And further, how does the basic communication course meet his own subjective needs? How does the process of education, which the basic
course he is disrupting is certainly a part of, systematically produce students who cause violence and disruption in our classrooms? As a critical scholar, I can't help but move the conversation away from Bruce and say that Bruce is only a product of an educational system that ignores the real material concerns that Bruce lives within. This is to say, Bruce has been let down by education. Schooling is decontextualized, divided into disciplinary parts that are then divided further without connections and meaningful distinctions (Kohn, 1993). Schooling is rendered artificially neutral, removed so much from Bruce's life that he may rightly question the impact education has on his everyday world (McLaren, 1993). Schooling does ignore the body and spirit of students, privileging the mind and cognitive at the expense other ways of knowing (hooks, 1994). And schooling is conducted in a social world that demands quantitative testing, assessments, existing always in a financial crisis, especially in a society that allows politicians to use the future of children as bait for endorsements and hopeful voters (Apple, 1996). Is it any wonder that we, as a society, produce students like Bruce? Is it any wonder Bruce asserts power through the only means he has: shock and intimidation?

But I also want to make an argument that is not very welcome in critical educational literature. I want to argue that there is still a place for teacherly authority in the classroom. There is a place where the threat on my body and the bodies of other students and teachers overwhelms the needs of that particular student in this particular moment. So when I sat in that classroom and I saw how scared that young teacher was and how the other students reacted around Bruce, I was ready as the
then Assistant Director to stand and stop the class if I felt it needed to be done. I was ready and prepared to say, *no more for you—you have just ended your participation in this classroom*. There is a place for teacher-centered power in the classroom. When Shor (1992) notes that his goal is for students to erase him so much that his presence is unnecessary, I want to say fine, but not when the bodies and spirits of others are at risk. Not when I can do something that makes that space more livable for others. And while my first priority is making education a process that does not systematically produce Bruces through the erasing of their very subjectivity, I also understand that my job is to maintain a space that is as safe as possible for collaborative learning. When that environment is threatened by troubled students and I can’t help them individually to adjust their own interaction in class, then my responsibility to the class as a whole kicks in and I must respond.

**THIRTEEN**

Several summers ago, I went to a conference in Iowa on cultural politics. In that conference, I was privileged to meet and work with several of the top scholars in cultural communication studies. I was excited and inspired by this experience; yet, I was simultaneously amazed to hear how some critical scholars talked about education. One very well known and very prolific critical/cultural scholar noted that education should be “apolitical.” S/he claimed that education should be about “learning” and that we should never “push our own ideological agenda”
on to our students. Further, s/he argued that if students used his/her classes in order to continue oppressive acts, then that was okay because s/he was just teaching them, not telling them how to use what s/he taught. My mind spun, thinking about being accused of teaching politics at the expense of content by a student in my course. As I think about “at-risk students,” “critical performative pedagogy,” “the erasure of bodies” and “power in the classroom,” I am well aware that education is always already, in every way, a political enterprise. The teacher, as soon as s/he picks readings, activities, or very the subject of a class, is making political choices—to do this, is always a choice not to include that. Every act is a denial of other possibilities—a choice of consequences that comes from somewhere, from someone. Such choices are performative—they create the basis of conversation, the formation of knowledge, as well as the promises and limitations of possibility.

My vision of critical performative pedagogy is one that privileges the body, mind, and spirit of educational bodies. My vision includes teaching politics and giving students the tools necessary to see what forms those politics. My vision also makes space for them to see the political in every pedagogical situation, regardless of whether that teacher foregrounds it. My vision calls for a balance between democratic collaborative pedagogy and teacherly authority, allowing every educational subject to carry expertise in different areas bred through experience while not denying the teacher’s necessary role as the guardian. My vision of critical performative pedagogy values the transformative, the critical, the
reflexive, the bodily, and the belief that, with possibility, there is hope for all students.

FOURTEEN

It was after class and I was picking up my teacherly stuff—my chalk holder, my photocopied essays, my class notes, and the random pens and pencils I take to every class. The clock marked the end of my teaching day, knowing that next week the instructor would be back and I would have to resume my note taking. I was sad to see my day come to an end; however, I was glad to know that my co-researcher and I were progressing toward the end of this research project on whiteness in the classroom. In my head, I remembered Howard and Sophia pulling, tugging on the white woman in the middle, whispering their influence into her ears. I remembered her looking so confused, so tired. As I picked up the last of my materials, I recalled her during the debriefing period after the performance ended: “I wasn’t expecting to feel so conflicted in the performance—I was expecting it to be pretend, to be like I was in a play. Yet, when I was being pulled by Howard and Sophia, it really felt authentic—it felt real. And it was hard to keep moving through the performance because I felt that if I made a mistake and did not anticipate the tug, they could really hurt me. It was just a few minutes, but I am tired as a result.” I smile, knowing this feeling in my own body—knowing that this is precisely the power of performance. It is precisely the power of performance to highlight the tensions of our everyday lives in ways that make us understand the forces at work in our nego-
tations of race and power. I think about this woman and know, somehow know, that the next time she is in the presence of a racist comment, a comment made in ignorance or spite against someone of another race, a comment meant to push up whiteness at the expense of others, I know she will feel those arms on hers—she will feel Howard and Sophia's grip and know that she must negotiate the tensions or risk choosing. Either choice is risky—choosing to rely on privilege with the new knowledge that such choices enact violence will risk her sense of self, her sense of right and wrong. Choosing to resist, to side with Howard, to allow the critical voice to rise within her to mark racism in action, will also be a risk. She will feel the tug and know that it is no longer an easy choice, for ultimately it is Howard at the end of that grip—it is a new friend made in this class that gets implicated in her decisions. She, after this performance, is at-risk in new ways.

I turn for the door and see her standing there. She is putting on her jacket. She looks at me and thanks me for my time in class. She smiles. "I'll remember this for some time," she says.

I'm sure she will.

REFERENCES


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