

Teach 7

How Can We Serve

Commitment to teaching well is a commitment to service. Teachers who do the best work are always willing to serve the needs of their students. In an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture, service is devalued. Dominator culture pointedly degrades service as a way of maintaining subordination. Those who serve tend to be regarded as unworthy and inferior. No wonder then that there is little positive discussion of the teacher's commitment to serve. Working in public school systems, I meet more teachers who talk openly about service. In the academic world of colleges and universities the notion of service is linked to working on behalf of the institution, not on behalf of students and colleagues. When professors "serve" each other by mutual commitment to education as the practice of freedom, by daring to challenge and teach one another as well as our students, this service is not institutionally rewarded. The absence of reward for service in the interest of

building community makes it harder for individual teachers to make a commitment to serve.

Indeed, in colleges and universities excellent teaching is often seen as mere icing on the cake of institutional maintenance. Scholarly writing and administrative tasks are deemed the substantive acts. Teaching, and whether or not one does it well, is merely subject to individual choice or whim. Even though every college in our nation uses student evaluations of a teacher's work in the classroom as a factor in job reviews, they are deemed important usually when they are negative and can be used to bolster decisions to dismiss or not promote a professor. During my undergraduate years I was continually surprised by the reality that most of my professors seemed to be uninterested in teaching. They approached the classroom as though teaching was an unwelcome task they needed to complete so that they could then go about their real work of writing, thinking, departmental meetings, and so on. Of course, the system of requiring students to take specific courses in order to complete degree requirements has ensured that uncaring professors, whose classes might otherwise be empty, could and can count on full classrooms.

One reason mainstream conservative academics can be so angry about the challenge to racist and sexist biases in education and the demand for more inclusiveness, is that meeting these demands brought in new and interesting faculty whose courses students wanted to take. There are boring, drunk professors (usually white and male, but not always) using the same notes they have used for more than twenty years, teaching the usual white male-centered classes. These teachers are still more acceptable to the academy, especially if they have degrees from elite schools, than are women and men who are progressive, who care, who want to make the classroom a compelling place for learning. Mass media, particularly newspapers and magazines, have played a major role in misleading the public about the nature of changes in academic environments.

Many Americans, a great many of whom have never been to college, believe that white males are now a minority; that traditional white male-centered classrooms have been eliminated; that black/people of color and feminist white women have taken over. They do not know that despite the powerful interventions of progressive academics to challenge biases, embrace diversity, and support greater inclusion of diverse subject matter, conservative white males still rule in the academy just as they do in our government.

When progressive teachers and their classrooms started to attract a large number of diverse students, a backlash misrepresented these progressive settings as being without standards of excellence, without meaningful material. Even though it was not the case that feminist scholars stopped teaching white males (there may have been a few teachers who felt that there were so many courses focusing on white male perspectives that they could risk not including material by white males), the public was given the impression via mass media that white males were being excluded. Overall, academic women of all races and men of color tended to add new voices to the old voices rather than eliminate the voices of white men altogether. Yet by making the public believe that students were and are being miseducated, reading Alice Walker and not Shakespeare, the conservative white male elites, their colored counterparts, and their non-academic cohorts have been able to exploit the myth of political correctness. Ironically, these conservative academics are often those least interested in teaching.

To many professors of all races, the classroom is viewed as a mini-country governed by their autocratic rule. As a microcosm of dominator culture, the classroom becomes a place where the professor acts out while sharing knowledge in whatever manner he or she chooses. In talking with academic colleagues around the nation, I found that more than eighty percent of the classes many of us attended to acquire doctorate degrees were taught by individuals who lacked basic commu-

nication skills. In no other sphere of corporate America would such incompetence be tolerated. Incompetence in teaching can be tolerated because the consumer is a young person who is perceived as having no rights. Subordinated by a hierarchal system that indoctrinates students early on, letting them know that their success depends on their capacity to obey, most students fear questioning anything about the way their classrooms are structured. In our so-called best colleges and universities, teaching is rarely valued.

At its best, teaching is a caring profession. But in our society all caring professions are devalued. No wonder then that professors, especially those at elite institutions, eschew the notion of service as a vital dimension of their work with students in and out of the classroom. In graduate school professors often single out an individual student for praise, even adoration, offering to that student an intensity of engagement denied everyone else. In my graduate experience when this happened the rest of us were made to feel that we were simply not worthy. As students we were socialized to believe that when we entered a classroom and were not regarded with respect by the professor, it was due to some inner lack and not the consequence of unjust hierarchy and dominator culture. The politics of domination as they are played out in the classroom often ensure that students from marginal groups will not do well. Imagine how crazy-making it must be for students coming from an exploited and oppressed group, who make their way through the educational system to attend college by force of a will that resists exclusion, and who then enter a system that privileges exclusion, that valorizes subordination and obedience as a mark of one's capacity to succeed. It makes sense that students faced with this turnabout often do poorly or simply lose interest in education.

As a graduate student who came into the academy from a place of resistance, challenging the sexism of my parents who did not think it important for a female to have a higher degree,

challenging the sexism of educators, then confronting racism, I was continually shocked when individual professors, usually white males, would act hatefully toward me. In those naïve years I did not understand the extent to which racist and sexist iconography of the black female body and person had imprinted on the consciousness of many professors the notion that black people in general, and black females in particular, were simply not suited for higher learning. Of course the emotional violence directed at me by professors was not something that could be reported or documented. Contempt, disdain, shaming, like all forms of psychological abuse, are hard to document especially when they are coming from a person in authority, especially one who is skilled in the art of dissimulation. Usually, the only recourse a student has is turning to the peers of their harasser. Fear, especially fear of betrayal, usually silences the student victims of professorial psychological terrorism.

Sometimes professorial harassment of a student is imitated by students. This is often the case when marked differences of race, class, or gender, set a student apart from the group. Group oppression of an individual student deemed unsuitable was depicted in the film *A Beautiful Mind*, where students from privileged class backgrounds assaulted the psyche of a brilliant peer from a working-class background. While the film depicts the forms of psychological terrorism privileged white males use to shame and demean their working-class peer, it then undercuts the message by making it seem that this psychological terrorism was not really meant to hurt, that they meant no harm. Whenever a student is psychologically terrorized by peers or professors there is a tendency to blame the student, to see him or her as misinterpreting reality. No wonder then that students who are victims of psychological assault tend to become passive-aggressive, to remain silent or complain rather than engage in proactive resistance.

Students are so socialized to be docile that they will often critique an uncaring professor's teaching habits and share that

critique with a caring professor. Yet when students have come to me with horror stories about professors and I suggest they use boycotts or the power of anonymous letters to express their opinions they are more often than not unwilling to challenge the status quo. A brilliant young black female graduate student, who along with several peers bore the brunt of a professor's racist and sexist comments, documented his statements, then wrote an anonymous letter to the academic dean. The tenured older white male professor responded by coming to class and devoting an entire lecture to talk about the "cowardly" student who wrote an anonymous letter. His intent was to publicly shame the student. The student felt fear and shame even as she also felt glad to have made a gesture of resistance. Although her preliminary work toward the doctorate had been deemed excellent, when it was time for her to go forward in her studies, no professor, not even the few liberals, wanted to work with her. Lack of a potential advisor/mentor professor was the reason given for denying her admission to candidacy for doctoral work. Even though the student understood the politics behind this decision she also felt unable to take on the challenge of continually fighting what she feared would be her lot if she continued in graduate school. Her experience reminded me of the many times I was told, and read in my files, that I did not have the "proper demeanor of a graduate student," which meant that I dared to challenge my professors and refused to accept passively their domination.

This gifted young woman dropped out of school, traumatized by her experience of academic injustice. Yet she was truly excellent in her studies. Often in a dominator context there is less a concern for whether students are brilliant hard workers and more a concern with whether they are willing to play the roles assigned them by professors. On the professorial level this fixation on demeanor usually surfaces when candidates from underrepresented groups come to be interviewed by middle- and upper-class white colleagues who share a common language

and experience. When the candidates are individuals of color coming from working-class backgrounds they may not “fit” with the group norm. The perception that they will not fit may make them lose jobs for which they are eminently qualified. It is a fiction that when faced with excellent students and professors of color predominantly white faculties will affirm and reward brilliance. Time and time again I have witnessed faculties support folks of color that they deem not very smart but hardworkers over individuals who are deep and excellent thinkers and scholars. Sociologists who study race and job performance document the fact that unenlightened white folks have greater suspicion of black folks/people of color who do excellent work than those whose performance is mediocre. They are more comfortable with people of color who act subordinate or are mediocre because this serves as a confirmation bias of their deep-seated belief in the inferiority of non-white groups.

When I interview black students and scholars who have achieved academic excellence, against the odds I almost always hear stories of the caring professor who functioned as a supportive mentor figure. Psychoanalyst Alice Miller used the term “enlightened witness” to refer to that person who stands with someone being abused and offers them a different model of interaction. Caring teachers are always enlightened witnesses for our students. Since our task is to nurture their academic growth, we are called to serve them.

Commitment to serving the needs of students is not without its pitfalls. It is a counter-hegemonic liberatory practice taking place within a dominator context. Hence students wanting help from progressive educators often come face to face with conflicting desires. They may desire help from an “enlightened witness” while simultaneously desiring to be recognized and rewarded by conventional conservative sources. In states of conflict, students will usually opt to go with the status quo. This experience often leads caring professors to feel cynical about any effort to intervene in the dominator context and

engage students with care. Serving students well is an act of critical resistance. It is political. And therefore it will not yield the normal rewards provided when we are simply perpetuating the status quo. The lack of rewards may be less disappointing than rejection by the very students we have served.

A black female student I had mentored throughout her undergraduate years entered graduate school and found that the professors who became her advisors were very critical of my work. She felt torn in her allegiances. When she was writing her master's thesis, and writing way beyond the required number of pages, her primary advisor told her that her work was excellent, even publishable, but that she should work hard to revise, yet again, and not turn in her thesis on time. I shared with the student that I thought this was contradictory advice. If the work was excellent and publishable why not turn it in on time and then revise? Better yet, why not keep some of those extra chapters for dissertation writing? This beloved student, whom I had nurtured for years, accused me of being jealous of her, of believing that she was not capable of finishing work. She was unable to hear my concern that brilliant black female students delay turning work in and never complete their degrees. I did not want her to fall into this category. She never talked with me again.

My disappointment was intense. Yet I could see that this student wanted to become a major player in the existing dominant culture of academe. That desire placed her at odds with maintaining loyalty to me or the values we had shared when she was an undergraduate. I was more concerned that she complete her degree in a reasonable amount of time than that she revise and revise to achieve superlative standing in the eyes of an individual professor. Women of all races and non-white men have been the students that I see most often paralyzed by fears that their work will not be excellent. In such cases I always think it important to be less of a perfectionist and more concerned about completing the work on time.

Every caring teacher knows that our ideas are always in process. Unlike other professions we have the opportunity to return to our written work and make it better. Sadly, students from marginalized groups who have not had a long history in the academy (they are often the first generation in their family to attend college) are often devastated when the work they do is good but not excellent. Perfectionist thinking, reinforced by professors, prevents them from seeing that none of us is excellent all the time. Contrary to much popular misinformation that suggests black students perform inadequately in college because they are indifferent or lazy, much of the inadequacy I see is caused by fear of being less than perfect, of trying to reach standards that are unreachable, thus leading students to despair and self-sabotage.

Teachers who care, who serve their students, are usually at odds with the environments wherein we teach. More often than not, we work in institutions where knowledge has been structured to reinforce dominator culture. Service as a form of political resistance is vital because it is a practice of giving that eschews the notion of reward. The satisfaction is in the act of giving itself, of creating the context where students can learn freely. When as teachers we commit ourselves to service, we are able to resist participation in forms of domination that reinforce autocratic rule. The teacher who serves continually affirms by his or her practice that educating students is really the primary agenda, not self-aggrandizement or assertion of personal power. Conventional pedagogy often creates a context where the student is present in the classroom to serve the will of the professor, meeting his or her needs, whether it be the need for an audience, the need to hear fresh ideas to stimulate work, or the need to assert dominance over subordinated students. This is the tradition of abuse the caring teacher seeks to challenge and change. Commitment to service helps teachers remain accountable to students for ethical content in the classroom. Care and service intervene on managerial notions of classroom conduct.

Commitment to service on the part of teachers bridges the gap between public school education and the teaching that takes place in colleges and universities. In this sense, service restores connection between the various stages of schooling, countering the artificial separation of public school learning and college experience. The teacher who can ask of students, “What do you need in order to learn?” or “how can I serve?” brings to the work of educating a spirit of service that honors the students’ will to learn. Committed acts of caring let all students know that the purpose of education is not to dominate, or prepare them to be dominators, but rather to create the conditions for freedom. Caring educators open the mind, allowing students to embrace a world of knowing that is always subject to change and challenge.