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Thinking for Ourselves: Community, Challenge and Empowerment in the Classroom and Beyond

As I began my career in theatre education, I spoke with a mentor about the responsibility of the educator in the classroom and beyond, and, at the time, how overwhelming it seemed. She said to me, “Teaching is a learning process. It is a journey you travel with your students.” I discovered that teaching is a *life-long* journey and what I teach successfully in one class can be a dismal failure in another class. While I approach each class I teach as a new learning experience, I find that it is best if I establish and share my philosophy with my students from the beginning: the cornerstones of my philosophy are the creation of community, the posing of challenges, and the fostering of empowerment.

By creating a community of students and teacher, the learning environment can be a constructive environment where students more likely share their ideas and opinions. An activity I do at the beginning of the semester with my entry level courses is a meet and greet. Everyone introduces themselves to everyone in the class and provides one interesting fact about themselves – a different fact for each person – we take notes (I participate as well) and discover something new about our community members. At the end of the exercise, conversation erupts around fascinating facts about people as well as common experiences and it begins building the classroom community by establishing a base for group development. As a part of the community development, it is very important to show the students the process it takes to reach conclusions or come to a theory. It is also important for the students to see that their teachers are fallible for again, it reveals their humanity in the minds of their students and makes clear that knowledge is not the possession of only the elite. A practice I borrowed from a former mentor and current friend, is to be honest about my knowledge. If a student asks me a question in class and I do not have an answer I simply say, “I am not sure. Why don’t we both look that up and talk about it during the next class period.” I make sure I follow up with the students by the next class period. In this way, both the student and I engage in the learning process together.

The classroom as community brings me to my second cornerstone for it fosters an environment that challenges both teacher and students. Teaching is a form of activism, and by teaching how ideology works, in any subject, it encourages students to critically engage with world around them. Jill Dolan said it best, “Teach for questions, not for answers. Focus on the gaps, the omissions, the whys, the maybes, but always take a stand around the knowledge you share or discover.”¹ By teaching critical skills, I give my students the ability to analyze any topic and to critically examine the social and cultural constructs of that topic. The classroom is a place to challenge our (students’ and teacher’s) understanding of identity and how our identities shape our knowledge and perceptions. I encourage my students to constantly and consistently ask themselves (and I do this as well) how they are invested in their own knowledge and learning process. I ask how they can articulate that knowledge to their fellow classmates. It is important for students and teachers to resist taking their understanding for granted.

I find that multicultural and feminist pedagogies bring me to my third cornerstone for they inform my teaching philosophy by giving me the tools to help empower my students. It is

¹ Jill Dolan. *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance*. Wesleyan UP, 2001, p.144.

my belief that learning does not end the moment a student walks out of the classroom (or leaves the virtual classroom forum) and to encourage further thought on a subject I require the students to draw from their own experiences in order to make the connections between their life and the topic under study.

By encouraging the students to question and to participate in classroom dialogue, this pedagogical technique gives the students the tools to take an active role in their education. Once the students begin to engage actively, it opens the way for them to possibly question the construction of that education. An important aspect of consciousness-raising is to understand the experiences of operation and liberation through applying personal emotions and cognition to the ideas.

On many levels I feel that it is an educator's job to give students the tools with which to actively pursue their education. I would be doing a disservice to my students if I did not provide them with the opportunities to question how they learn and what they learn. By establishing and sharing the cornerstones of my philosophy - community, challenge and empowerment - I not only cultivate a critically thinking community classroom, but also aid in each student's individual understanding of themselves and how they view society and help them consider how to function within society. The arts community is an ever-changing society constantly reinventing itself. What I do as a theatre educator is to encourage my students to continually question and reexamine their place in their society as they and their society changes. In this way, I hope to foster learned citizens who can critically and reflexively engage the world around them.