



Teaching Community

A Pedagogy of Hope

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It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite.

—Paulo Freire

Teach 4

Democratic Education

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.

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

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

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 student’s 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