

Afterword

Difficulty for Whom?: Teachers' Discourse About Difficult Students

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Two years ago, in my second semester at Queens College, I taught a senior writing-intensive seminar for English majors in which we read Gertrude Stein and Willa Cather in the contexts of historically constructed and contested categories of sex/gender and sexuality. While reading varied literary forms, we considered these writers' textual and historical resistances to, evasions of, and engagements with identity categories such as "woman" and "lesbian." On the day that I was being observed by my department Chair, one student, in his presentation, began a discussion of "butch/femme" as a way of understanding the characters and the central relationship represented in Stein's (1998) *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. As I listened, I was impressed with his use of these gender terms, specific enough to lesbian and other queer cultures that I had not anticipated their introduction into our conversation unless I introduced them. (Obviously, from my surprise, you will gather that no students in the class had identified themselves as lesbian, gay, or queer; nor were any of the students legible as such to me.)

Suddenly, another student exploded in anger at the use of these terms, based apparently on his perception of the first student as "not-gay" and on his defensive revelation that his mother is a lesbian. By claiming an inside position of authentic knowledge, one student attacked another as supposedly homophobic. In contrast, I had been pleasantly surprised by what I took to be a sophisticated and intelligent effort to explore the valences of these gender terms as a way of reading Stein's lesbian codes in her autobiographical project. It was an uncomfortable moment, perhaps especially for me in my second semester with my Chair observing me, but certainly for other students too. In my salvage attempt, I introduced explicitly a discussion of the contexts of naming, offering a brief history of the contest within women's history over "butch/femme" experiences, and making a case for understanding these gender terms both as related to heterosexual gender terms and as a queer revision of them.

My Chair's observation generously put it this way: "This was a very heated moment, but it was beautifully mediated by Professor English." In passing, let me note, that I'm aware that it could have gone differently. More to the point, as I have come to realize, this "heated moment" represents also the sort of teaching moment that I'm aiming for—a moment in which words and naming and

their contexts take center stage in ways that matter to those participating in the conversation. It has taken me longer, however, to begin to understand the value of the angry explosion. By breaking the decorum of the classroom, my “difficult” student (and, yes, he was consistently that) shifted the energy of the seminar conversation, stimulating an extra level of attention and involvement from each student, myself, and my supervising Chair.

At issue here are excess and the limits of classroom discourse—what exceeds allowable meanings in teacher and student language, what can be said and what can’t be said, how much feeling or affect can be expressed, what versions of self are appropriately performed by me and by my students. In addition to stimulating what turned into an interesting conversation about the terms “butch/femme” and their cultural and historical locations, the “difficult” student—no matter how much he annoyed or even offended me and other students—gave us the gift of awareness of what might otherwise remain invisible: he marked the edges of allowable discourse and made difficulty for my previously unperturbed (albeit relatively) persona as a teacher. By challenging the allowable discourse of my classroom, he taught me about my fear of losing rhetorical and epistemological and emotional control, even when I think I’ve surrendered some of my authority (that fantasy) in the interests of students’ engagement in making meaning. The difficult student and moment bring me back to the reality of the edges in my classroom. In this case, by posing both pedagogical and social difficulties, a student’s excess opened a space where I could reinvestigate my own authority.

Reconsidered in this way, I see my own fear of losing professional and rhetorical control, especially in front of my Chair. (Given that it was still my first year at Queens, I couldn’t know yet how her thoughtfulness about teaching and her experience as a teacher would lead her to understand this “heated moment.”) One student’s explosion, transgressing the etiquette of academic discourse, raises questions for me about what I allow myself and my students to say and to perform in the classroom. What sort of discursive world am I setting up for my students’ assimilation? What is the place of “feeling” in this discursive world? How do our emotional responses shape our intellectual work? Why didn’t I move the class toward a discussion of the “feelings” raised in this “heated moment”? (Barry Manilow, in the background. Yecch! What’s this “Yecch” about?) Would I have been seen as having “beautifully mediated” this “very heated moment” if I had more explicitly engaged all of our feelings?

One thing I do know is that I didn’t do so because I don’t want to fathom fully some of my students’ homophobia and heterosexism, although I clearly want to engage their minds in thinking about sex/gender, sexuality, and institutional and ideological heterosexuality. Yet, it strikes me that, in an explicit move to a discussion of feeling, I would be putting my students’ responses to “homosexuality,” their possible homophobia, within sight, allowing homophobia possibly, heterosexism almost certainly, to become visible and articulate, in ways that could be very, very uncomfortable for me as a queer person. Was I trying to be a professional in the sense of separating my “personal” stake from

my pedagogical stake? Yes, of course. And, that's necessary. But where and when do I define the edges of my own difficult, untenured, queer location in the classroom and in the academy?

This anecdote—like so many others that teachers share with one another *about* their students—teaches about what exceeds rhetorically and epistemologically the limits of classroom discourse and about how certain behaviors and certain performances of self are marked as acceptable and others as unacceptable. This anecdote, in other words, is also *about* a teacher and his particular version of the classroom, as much as it is about students. In retrospect, I think that I might have gone further into the feelings being expressed, and I may have done so if I were not so obviously, in that classroom moment, also literally and immediately within an institutional relationship as an untenured professor being observed by my Chair. As I think about these issues, I remember my pain, in my first couple of years as a teaching assistant at Rutgers University, when students dismissed Adrienne Rich's (1999) complex and personal essay about women and writing, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," because the editors, necessarily in discussing Rich's work, identify her as a lesbian in their introductory note. I remember, in some semesters, choosing *not* to teach Rich's essay because I didn't want to feel pain in the face of my students' homophobic responses. And, I didn't want to expose my own fear and "difficulty," nor endure the painful contradiction of professional objectivity in the face of responses that threatened my own subjectivity.

To what extent, then, do I let my fear of emotional difficulty edit my curricula? Obviously, not always, as the curricular context of my opening anecdote should make clear. Yet, there are other times. For example, last semester in my Composition class, I taught Cindy Sherman's (2000) photography, together with a group of faculty teaching courses linked in a learning community. In planning for our group symposium on Sherman's provocative self-representations, it was "obvious" to us that we didn't want to include her edgy photographs of prosthetic genitalia: why? To what extent were we invested in maintaining our own control and in avoiding prospective or potential difficult moments in our classrooms and in our institution? Is it possible to be in control of the difficult moments that may open for our use?

This semester, my Composition class is linked with an American Studies class in which students will look at the *Declaration of Independence*. While preparing, I enthusiastically played with the idea of teaching rhetorical citations of that text, including the Seneca Falls (1996) *Declaration of Sentiments* and Patti Smith's recent and revolutionary version of the *Declaration of Independence* on a live recording of her song, "Rock'n Roll Nigger" (1998), and in a song, "New Party," on her new cd, *Gung Ho* (2000). Then, as I thought about it, I realized that I was not at all certain that I wanted to introduce the word "nigger" into my classroom, at least not without carefully raising a much larger historical context of racial and racist naming and the citation of those names by African-Americans and by Patti Smith. Certainly, such a conversation about words and their contexts

and about words and power would be entirely appropriate to my course goals. However, I decided not to teach Smith's text, based partly on the realization that I would be unable to do a lot of other things because of the time it would take to offer sufficient context for her use of the word. But I know that I'm also thinking as I make this decision: Do I really want to experience this discomfort in the classroom? Do I really want to risk being misunderstood as a supposedly "white" person using the "n" word? Why not take the easier route?

Moreover—and this is also important—how can I teach Smith without playing her louder than my faculty neighbors will tolerate? Last year, my use of Lauryn Hill's (1998) *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* led to a request to turn the music down, despite the fact that we had endured the loud drone of this particular professor's monological lectures all semester. I felt like a teenager in my parent's house. The choice of Smith's text, heard at what I take to be an appropriate volume, would quite literally go beyond the limits of acceptable discourse in the material, architectural space of my classroom.

In any event, my interest, here, is in the acts of editing, even censorship, that we perform in order to homogenize the classroom in our "teacherly" images, in order to avoid crossing those lines that threaten one's sense of being a professional teacher, and certainly also in order to avoid transgressing boundaries that would get us in trouble within the institution, especially if we are untenured faculty. Is this not how institutions reproduce themselves? Avoiding my own "difficulty" is a necessary and sane response to difficult negotiations, to my negotiations of difficulty, but examining such avoidance is also useful for its revelation of what exceeds the discursive limits of my classroom.

When Composition teachers gather around our proverbial water coolers, we share stories of our experiences with students. Sometimes those stories tell of encouraging successes, sometimes of frustrations, and sometimes of the particular challenges of "difficult situations," or even "difficult students." We share stories in our search for new understandings and responses, but our teacher discourse rarely moves beyond the assumed limits of our classroom goals and the worlds that those goals take for granted.

"Difficult situations" offer moments of potential disruption of the world that I assume as a classroom teacher. The implicit contract between teacher and student breaks down with the student who won't wait to speak or the student who explicitly challenges the goals of the course or the student who explodes in anger or in tears. Rather than tell a story with a familiar narrative of a creative teacher's inventive response to "difficulty" (notice the comforting movement from crisis to resolution), I have been trying to tell about coming to see how "difficult situations" can productively threaten the classroom as a world made in my image. Certainly I necessarily and perhaps inevitably assert my authority and the authority of the academic institution behind me when faced with "difficulty" or resistance, but even as I do so I try *not* to miss seeing the productive challenge to a world centered around my teacherly persona. I try to see how conflict and "difficulty" and the power to apply those labels foreground how a

classroom is homogenized from a teacher's vantage point [to paraphrase Mary Louise Pratt (1999) in "Arts of the Contact Zone"].

We necessarily teach within power relations and institutional cultures that precede and follow us, and we can certainly never be entirely outside of those relations and cultures. However, as we play our teacherly roles, we might also notice them as roles; we might also see the limits of the world centered around our rules for oral and literate exchanges, and, in so doing, we can at least change the ways that we talk about students and *their* difficulties (or the difficulties they pose for us) as we gather around the proverbial water cooler or wherever we find ourselves in teacher discourse. The lesson of letting go of (or, perhaps better, of holding more lightly to) the rules, values, and goals of my discursive world remains ahead. I have been teaching in colleges for fifteen years. With more and more experience, I find myself more and more skilled at these delicate negotiations. I also find myself less and less certain of the boundaries of allowable discourse and the acceptable performances of self in my classrooms. Perhaps, in this case, experience teaches me to know less and to feel okay about that.

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