A Revisionist Approach to Education

"Education consists mainly in what we have unlearned."
- *Mark Twain's Notebook*, 1898

As a teacher, I constantly question and renegotiate the balance between teacher/student authority; encourage my students to occasionally question their values, identities, and beliefs so that they can situate their ideas and texts within multiple contexts; and finally, I aim to create critical-minded discourse communities that will help students become responsible, democratic citizens.

Students do not learn effectively in classrooms run by dictators. At the beginning of each semester, I collaborate with my students to generate two lists of expectations—one for me and one for them. Occasionally, we work together to write assignments and grading rubrics; I let students work in groups to write initial drafts of assignments and rubrics and then I revise accordingly. I gradually ask my students to become more and more responsible for the learning that takes place during class discussions as well. In one of my literature courses, for example, I asked students to write one-page responses each week in which they had to frame critical questions about the texts we were reading that were not rhetorical and did not demand either/or, yes/no responses. These questions facilitated our discussions each week and communicated to the students that they had more control over their learning than I did. As one student wrote in a course evaluation, "Ed always lets us talk about things that matter to us, which helps me learn more than I do in my other classes. He only intervenes when it is absolutely necessary or when someone really needs help."

Teaching is a performance, of course, but queer teachers bring the performative aspects of pedagogy into sharp focus. Students know or at least suspect from the first day of class that I am gay. My challenge, then, is to shift the focus away from my "gayness" so that students can focus on each other. I have to consciously reverse the roles of the performance by training students to see themselves as objects of inquiry, instead of me, so that they can become increasingly critical about their own values and opinions—how they want to express them verbally and in writing, to what degree they are willing to challenge them, and more importantly, how their own personal and textual identities will change when and if they decide to consider different, "subversive" perspectives.

Effective learning happens when students feel empowered, but also when there is energy in the classroom, which is why I make it a point to design three or four different activities for each class meeting. These activities range from putting students in groups to piece together essays that I cut up in advance (to teach transitioning and logical force) to complex games such as Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune (to reinforce material consistently throughout the semester). Occasionally, I allow students to generate and pose questions in a game I call "Stump the Class." They sit on their desks in a circle, and each student asks another a question relating to the course material. The point of the game is to ask the most difficult question (but also a reasonable one that we should all know the answer to), and if nobody can answer it, you have "stumped the class." These activities and games help students remember material, of course, but they also create an engaging and just downright fun atmosphere for learning.

I try to maintain this level of engagement in my composition courses as well by keeping the focus on the students and their personal experiences. Like feminist models, queer pedagogies subscribe to process-oriented approaches to writing. By teaching students how to become more comfortable with the daunting revision process and handling texts that are constantly changing, I am inadvertently teaching them how to view themselves as texts that constantly transform and undergo revision. Also, because I believe that writing materializes self, I ask them to use themselves as texts while they are writing—to rely on personal experiences as a way to understand, frame, and revise critical ideas. One of my writing assignments, for example, asks students to write researched auto-ethnographies in which they use personal narratives to engage critically with specific sub-cultures with which they identify. I have students collaborate in peer-review groups during each stage of the writing process: they work together on brainstorming, thesis selection, outlining, research, composing, and revising. A process-oriented model that uses effective peer-review groups ultimately teaches students how to assert, respect, and respond to a plurality of voices.

In one of my recent composition courses, I moved peer-review out of the classroom entirely and asked students to collaborate on a course blog that I designed. What I discovered is that the conversations they had in cyberspace were more useful in helping them develop nuanced and original arguments. Their comments on their peers' work was more critical and, overall, students were more receptive to criticism—in fact, they loved it when their peers "ripped apart" their arguments by presenting counterclaims and posing difficult questions. The students I had that semester wrote with verve and voice, and I believe that this is the result, at least in part, of the lively conversations they had on the blog—it helped demonstrate how writing is actually a conversation.

I primarily rely on my students to assess the effectiveness of my pedagogy. In addition to asking students to complete written evaluations, I meet with them individually twice a semester to provide them with feedback on their progress in the course and to ask them for suggestions to improve my teaching. I also ask them to assess their learning and to offer suggestions on how to improve themselves as critical learners. Throughout the semester, I ask students to maintain a journal in which they record and reflect on all of their "Aha!" moments. The assignment is informal: there is no word requirement and I never collect the journals. But I do ask students to bring these journals to our individual meetings so that they have something to refer to when I ask them to walk me through their learning experience. Overall, students have responded to this assignment with enthusiasm, which consistently astonishes and delights me.

Teaching is important to me because it gives me an opportunity to use a gift that I have and one that I feel is invaluable in the learning process—creativity. I try to meet the individual needs of every student in my classroom, motivate my students to become passionate about literature and writing, and make sure that the students in my classroom have the ability to continue their education beyond college by becoming life-long learners. As John Dewey points out, "Every great achievement in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination," and I feel as if my own creativity helps students access their own, bold originality.