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# **Cultivating a Community of Truth Through Critical Pedagogy When Faced with Resistance: Teaching My Gender Students How to “Ride the Bus”**

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## **Abstract**

*This essay will identify how the authors confronted a community of resistance in a Gender and Communication classroom and turned it into a community of truth and tolerance. Working from a theoretical framework of Critical Pedagogy and the work of Parker Palmer, the authors will explore how the classroom is often seen as a culture of fear and disrespect. This culture of fear needs to be confronted by identifying a community of truth as found in two different models of truth. After exploring how to achieve a community of truth when faced with resistance, the authors will explain in great detail the application of a metaphor about “riding the bus” and how this metaphor has sustained them when faced with resistance.*

**KEY WORDS:** Critical pedagogy, teaching, gender, fear, Paulo Friere, Parker Palmer.

“I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess the power to make a student’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a person humanized or dehumanized.”

-Haim Ginott

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

When I first began my teaching career over 25 years ago I had a habit of committing a very bad joke. When my students would complain about an assignment or whine in class about schoolwork, I would jokingly hold up my grade book and say, “Who holds the grade book?” There might be a few murmurs but the act would generally quiet the class down and we could move on. My feeble attempt to diffuse the situation was not meant to be mean, but merely to allow me to move on to the next issue at hand.

I thought little of my actions until I received a student course evaluation that declared “Kevin is on a total power trip. He threatens us with bad grades if we don’t do what he says.” I was stunned and horrified. I realized I had mistakenly turned my classroom into a power struggle. That was the last thing I wanted to do but as a young graduate student starting his teaching career, I found myself in the middle of one of the many mistakes I have made in my career. I began to research issues of power in the classroom and found myself emerged in the literature of Critical Pedagogy. As I began to incorporate the works of people like Paulo Friere and Parker Palmer into my curriculum and classroom, I felt I had begun to remove much of the power

differential from my classrooms. I no longer asked, “Who has the grade book?” and I began to see where I was making mistakes.

A little over 10 years ago, I began teaching a course on Gender and Communication. I lobbied successfully to have the course added as an upper division elective to the General Education curriculum at the university where I taught. Imagine my horror during the first semester of teaching a section of Gender and Communication to a General Education audience when one student proclaimed in front of the entire class “this whole class is bullshit!” Once he spoke up, I found that this student was not alone. A few other students appeared to be so threatened by the course content that they were visibly angry in class.

I found myself wanting yell at them, “Don’t you understand that your gendered identity has been socially constructed by the dominant cultural norm!!!” But to do that, I would be returning to a power paradigm that I had worked so hard to remove. I needed to figure out how I could unite all the different groups of students in the classroom but not use force or power.

To answer this question, I returned once again to Critical Pedagogy and the work of Parker Palmer and his insightful work *The Courage to Teach*. In Critical Pedagogy I found the challenge to eliminate power from the classroom and give a voice to every student. In Palmer I was reminded of how the classroom is a masked culture of fear and once I realized that, I could quickly turn my attention and energy to uncovering the culture of truth that was right in front of my eyes. My reading challenged me to confront the fear in my class and find some way to discover the truth lying in wait. I also had to do this without creating a power struggle.

My brainstorming led me to create a metaphor that I began using in class that leveled the playing field for everyone involved. The metaphor involved using the concept of “riding a bus.” We are all on the same bus ride when exploring our gendered identities. The challenge lies in understanding that where we sit on that bus affects our perception of what we see while riding the bus. Once the bus stops and we all get off, we see that we have all been on the same journey together. Taking the ride allows students to share their version of the journey, which fosters a community of truth and defuses the community of resistance. This essay will explore Critical Pedagogy and Palmer’s cultures of fear and truth and will connect theory with practical anecdotes to provide relevant tools and strategies designed to confront resistance and enhance the classroom experience for both student and teacher alike.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Theory informs practice. It is the habit of many to align themselves with one theory and to claim its elements as their own. While understanding the power of such alignments, I instead find myself claiming elements of several theorists. I am deeply informed by the work of Parker Palmer and Critical Theory in my search for a theoretical framework.

As an educational theory, Critical Pedagogy expresses the belief that educational systems are based on power structures and that schools tend to serve the interests of those in power, intentionally or unintentionally (Billings 2008) [1]. In our schools, norms for social interaction, expectations and behaviors are perpetrated without rigorous review. Biases are taken for granted. Critical pedagogy expresses a belief that teachers and students must constantly question their world, both inside and outside the classroom. Critical pedagogy is committed to the transformative power of education. It has a strong emphasis on diversity (Gay 1995 [3];

Nieto, 2002 [6], Billings; 2008 [1]). Freire (1974) calls educators to name, to reflect critically, to act [2]. Winks (2005) marks these three phrases as the best definition of critical pedagogy [9].

Critical pedagogy has its roots in the work of Paulo Freire. Freire, a Brazilian educator, worked to develop a method of teaching literacy to indigent farm workers in order to empower them to vote. Freire published his theories of social justice and education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) [2]. Critical pedagogy works against the norm that would reproduce current power structures, or devalue inquiry, skepticism and disagreement (Billings, 2008 [1]).

Essential to critical pedagogy is the concept of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is “an awareness of the invisible oppression in society through education and activism” (Billings, p.3 [1]). Historic examples of invisible oppression are extensive. The issue of slavery in Great Britain and the United States is one example. The issue of suffrage is another. Billings reminds us that it is far easier to see “invisible oppression” through an historic lens than it is to recognize it in the here and now. Today, critical consciousness might encourage individuals to question “English only” policies in the United States or the use of tracking systems in education. Critical consciousness is a necessary element of critical pedagogy. Awareness is essential and awareness comes through the disequilibrium of questioning discourses.

Another essential component of critical pedagogy is hidden curriculum. Giroux (1983) added strength to our understanding of critical pedagogy in his work on hidden curriculum [4]. This concept builds on Freire’s belief that much of what is taught is unquestioned. Hidden curriculum notes that much of what is learned in school is not part of the official curriculum but rather involves subtle socialization in norms and mores of social interaction. Hidden curriculum supports the needs and mores of the dominant culture. Winks (2005) lends clarity to how it appears in our schools [9].

The hidden curriculum can be seen in schools when little boys are called on more than little girls, when only Eurocentric histories are taught, when teenage girls are socialized to believe that they are not good in math and sciences, when heroes but not heroines are taught, and when counselors track nonwhites to classes that prepare them to serve (p.47) [9]. Hidden curriculum is as dangerous in our schools as undercurrents are to the swimmers in the local river.

A third component of critical pedagogy is that of dialectic. Dialectic is the tension between opposing thoughts, ideas, concepts, values and beliefs (Wink, 2005 [9]). It is essential to note that the position of dialectic is a normal part of the learning process. While binary systems inform us and often are at the root of technological advances, in education, holding opposing tensions is often at the root of profound understanding. Consider the honest thinking of Winston Churchill who stated: “I am always ready to learn although I do not always like being taught” (Hume, p.24 [5]).

Dialectics are important in the learning process. Wink further explained, “Dialectic involves seeing and articulating contradictions; it is the process of learning from the oppositional view. Dialectic brings to light a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple facets of the opposite. As we learn while teaching and teach while learning, we are in a dialectical process (p.41) [5].

It is impossible to discuss critical pedagogy without discussing literacies. Critical pedagogy recognizes the many forms of literacies that inhabit our world. Refusing to limit the discussion to the reading and writing of language, literacies implies all of the ways in which individuals and societies make sense of

their world (Winks, 2005) [9]. Literacies are defined as reading, writing and reflecting (Winks, 2005) [9]. It is our underlying ways of knowing, thinking and making complex meanings. Forms of literacies include academic literacies, functional literacies, workplace literacies, emergent literacies. This list is not exhaustive. The literacies we use to understand the complexities of life is extensive. There is great power in literacies, power to name the world around us.

Equally powerful is the ability to silence. Silencing is often unexplored in education. It is often not consciously intended. It is often not consciously felt by the individual or individuals whose voices have been stilled. Winks (2005) explores it in the following

Often,  
Those who have more, silence those who have less;  
Those who are from the dominant European American culture silence  
Those from the non-European American cultures;  
Boys silence girls;  
Men silence women.

Often,  
Men don't know it;  
Boys don't know it;  
European Americans don't know it, and  
Those with more don't know it (p.58) [9].

Critical pedagogy is dedicated to giving voice to each individual who inhabits a classroom or a community. It is about the thoughtful, analytical understanding of power and how it forms our institutions and our selves.

To move from the work of a Brazilian lawyer turned educational activist to an American Quaker from the Midwest may seem something of a stretch but in reality, much of their work is compatible on several levels.

Palmer (1998, 2007) expresses his beliefs regarding pedagogy in his classic *The Courage to Teach* [7]. Palmer moves from a focus of educational pedagogy on the learner or the methodology of delivery systems, and focuses squarely on the interior life of the teacher. His haunting question remains “Who is the self who teaches?” This focus moves us away from educational techniques and into the realm of personhood.

An emphasis on the “who” of teaching, necessarily removes us from a discussion of external factors and requires us to look deeply within. Palmer asks the question; “How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world?” (p.4) [7]. Such an interior focus may seem at odds with Critical Theory’s focus on power structures however external systems are changed by interior thoughts and commitments. The two are not independent of each other. Palmer argues for a strong spotlight to be placed on the interior life of the teacher in an effort to effect change in the external systems of education.

Identity and integrity are at the core of Palmer’s work. These two elements comprise the core of the self that teaches. Identity is defined as

The evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic make-up, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others and to myself, the experience of love and suffering—and much, much more (p.14) [7].

Integrity is discussed as the ability to relate to those forces “in ways that bring me wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death” (p.14) [7]. The manner in which each individual teacher integrates the forces or discourses of life into their person has an enormous impact on the self and the work of teaching that the self engages in.

This focus on self does not mean that Palmer is opposed to discussing methodology. At the core of Palmer’s thoughts on methodology is the principle of paradox. While appreciative of the scientific advances that a binary system of thought has given the world (p.64), Palmer reminds us that paradox is an essential tension in teaching, just as paradox is an essential practice in breathing [7]. Perhaps the paradox that most deeply touches any educator is Palmer’s recognition that “the knowledge I have gained from the thirty years of teaching goes hand in hand with my sense of being a rank amateur at the start of each new class” (p.66) [7].

Teaching is immersed in paradox. Teaching requires the intellect and the heart to work in concert. Teaching requires intentionality to merge with flexibility. Teaching honors the individual stories of students and the corporate stories of the disciplines. Good teaching supports solitude and embraces community (p.77) [7]. These paradoxes are as essential to methodology as state standards are to outcomes.

Critical pedagogy and the focus on the interior life of the individual who teaches are the theoretical frameworks from which this experience is discussed. They are the lenses through which I viewed my experience in the classroom.

### **3. THE CLASSROOM**

After more than twenty years of teaching I have come to understand that good teaching does not come from learning a certain technique or formula. Teaching cannot be reduced to such prescriptive measures. Instead, good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. I firmly believe that learning is a process, not a final performance. It is on going and needs to be allowed to grow and evolve for each individual. The learning process involves allowing each student to discover what is important to him or her and it is my responsibility to help provide a safe environment where that learning process can take place. In his work *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, I have found author Fredrick Perls (1969) able to summarize this principle when he argued,

Right now I can only hypnotize you, persuade you; make you believe that I am right. You don’t know. I’m just preaching something. You wouldn’t learn from my words. Learning is a discovery. There is no other means of effective learning. You can tell a child a thousand times, “the stove is hot.” It doesn’t help. The child has to discover for himself. And I hope I can assist you in learning, in discovering something about yourself. (p. 1) [8]

I think the mistake that many professors make is that they truly believe that as a “professor” it is their job to “profess” to their students how much they know and make sure to remind the students on a regular basis how little the students know. As a result, long lectures ensue with students expected to hang on every dripping syllable and are then punished when they are unable to regurgitate those same syllables verbatim on an exam. This is not dialogue, this is monologue, and nothing very good ever comes out of monologue. Monologue is driven by power. I think teachers forget that they possess the power to create an environment that can either help students want to learn or can keep them from caring about learning at all.

The type of environment Perls refers to must come from a place where “connection” happens – where student and teacher connect not because the teacher is cool or popular, but connect because there is trust. Parker Palmer (1998) argued, “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subject, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves” (p.11) [7]. Connections can only emerge from dialogue – not monologue.

It is very tempting when teaching a course such as Gender and Communication to want to scream out in monologue “Look, everything you believe about yourself is wrong!! You’ve been brainwashed by dominant cultural norms!!” But that is preaching, not teaching. Real teaching involves making the type of connections that allow for discovery. A person is much more likely to embrace an ideology when they believe they have discovered this new found truth for themselves. Discovery, however, is often only obtained through dialogue. Each student must be able to share their story, their personal narrative in an environment where that narrative may draw ridicule or disagreement. My job as a teacher is to create a classroom environment where these narratives can be told safely.

Thus I am confronted with my first challenge – a safe environment where dialogue flourishes.

#### **4. THE CULTURE OF FEAR**

My challenge is compounded when I factor in the reality that a classroom is a breeding ground for fear on every level. Both teachers and students are afraid of failing. Teachers fear not being validated as a good teacher with good student course evaluations, not having their love for the subject matched by a room filled with eighteen and nineteen year olds, not engaging in cutting edge research and publishing in the “right” journals, or not being respected by their colleagues and peers. These fears can unknowingly turn the classroom into a battlefield where egos are defended and dialogue is quickly replaced with monologue because monologue allows for greater control [and power]. Teachers often get labeled as arrogant at this point as they defend their positions and ideologies and must always be right because if they cannot, then their fears are no longer imagined but real. Arrogance is often used as a mask for fear.

The more I am afraid the greater my level of resistance. If I do not resist dialogue, then my fears may overwhelm me. I must insist on monologue to mask my fear.

If blinded by their own fears, teachers can quickly forget how afraid their students are. When confronted with the possibility that how they have viewed the world (or maybe have been told how the world is to be viewed) for more than eighteen years, the fear can become crippling. Parker Palmer (1998) writes of this fear when he reminds us “Students, too, are afraid: afraid of failing, of not understanding, of being

drawn into issues they would rather avoid, of having their ignorance exposed or their prejudices challenged, of looking foolish in front of their peers” (p. 37) [7].

Courses such as Gender and Communication can feed these types of fears like a wildfire. When told that they are born with their sex but have chosen their gender based upon a number of factors, the threat to their own identity can confront students with a paradigm shift that can be scarier than anything they have ever experienced. Even if they are not confronted with a paradigm shift, students can find themselves having to risk self-disclosure and potential ridicule should they dare to engage in dialogue and share their stories. The Gender classroom can become a living nightmare of fear for the ill prepared student especially when led by a teacher who is crippled by his or her own fears. In order for true dialogue to emerge both teacher and student must be aware of and confront these fears.

Additionally, a classroom such as Gender can become a breeding ground for issues of diversity. If personal narratives are dialogued, then multiple perspectives on any topic must also be embraced. This gives birth to a room filled with diversity that only exacerbates fear. Palmer (1998) identifies this problem by explaining “If we embrace diversity, we find ourselves on the doorstep of our next fear: fear of the conflict that will ensue when divergent truths meet” (p.38) [7]. While a small portion of the population have learned how to manage conflict in a positive manner, it is safe to say that a majority of people tend to either avoid conflict for fear of it damaging the relationship, or they confront it head on with a “win-lose” mentality and embrace conflict only because they want to win the conflict.

To tolerate narratives that are the antithesis of your worldview creates a wonderful opportunity to engage diversity. It also engorges the culture of fear. It becomes very, very important for me as a teacher of a course such as Gender and Communication that I remember that my classroom has the potential to become this breeding ground for fear. If not, I can quickly miss-diagnose my student’s attitudes and responses. How I diagnose my student’s mindset has a tremendous impact on the type of cure I offer them for their fears.

Thus I am confronted with my second challenge - to confront and diffuse the culture of fear for both my students and myself but without the introduction of force or power.

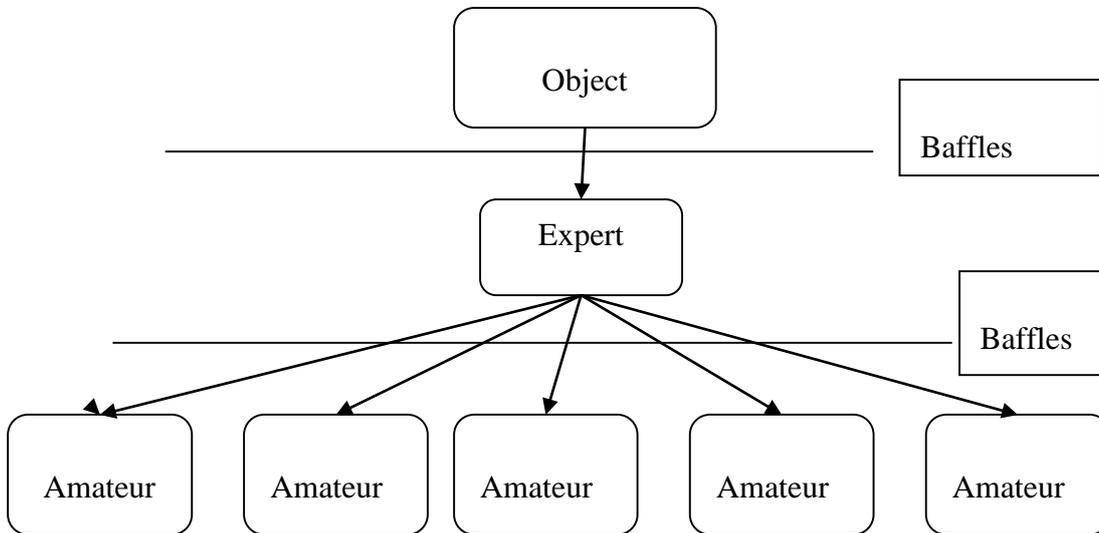
## **5. A COMMUNITY OF TRUTH**

In the Socratic tradition, the purpose of dialogue is to foster the discovery of truth. If true dialogue is to happen in the classroom, then the true goal of the classroom is to discover truth. But truth can be quickly buried in a culture of fear. The goal then is to create an environment where truth is practiced. But truth telling has functioned far too long from a flawed model. The dominant model of truth-knowing and truth-telling functions from a “top-down” perspective. Palmer (1998) identifies this problem and argues that there is a difference between the mythical but dominant model of truth telling and a true community of truth [7]. The difference lies in the four major elements of the mythical model as described by Palmer,

There are “objects” of knowledge that resides “out there” somewhere. There are “experts” who are people trained to know these objects. There are “amateurs” who are people without training and full of bias who depend on the experts for pure knowledge of the objects. Finally, there are “baffles” at every point of the transmission that allow knowledge to flow downstream while preventing subjectivity from flowing back up. (p.100-101) [7]

Information is clearly a monologue and flows down, from the object rather than the object being the center of attention. (See Diagram A)

Diagram A



Palmer further explains the problems of this model when he argues,

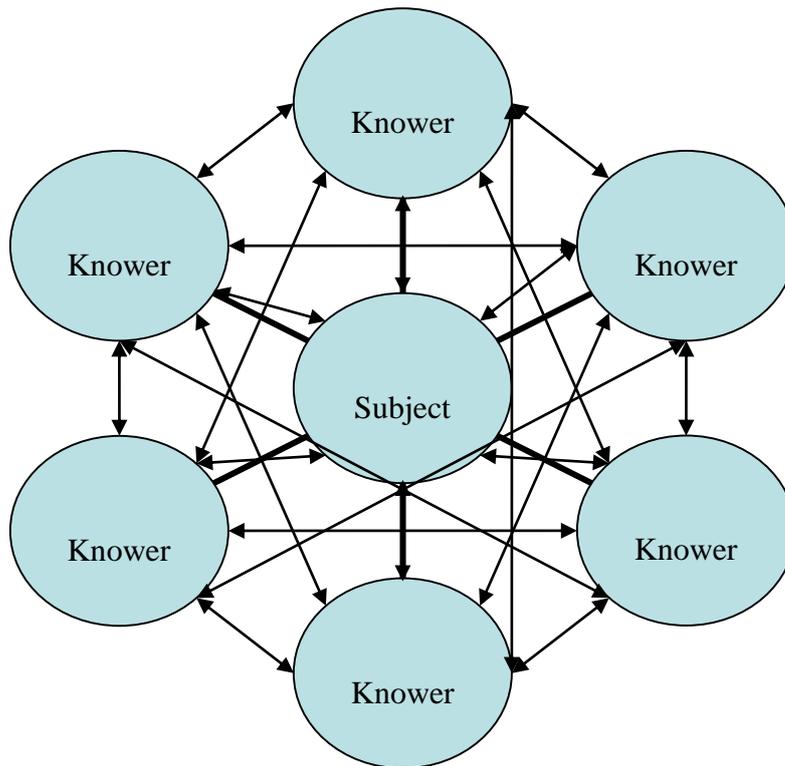
In the model, truth flows from the top down, from experts who are qualified to know truth to amateurs who are qualified only to receive truth. In this myth, truth is a set of propositions about objects; education is a system for delivering those propositions to students; and an educated person is one who can remember and repeat the experts' propositions. The image is hierarchical, linear, and compulsive-hygienic, as if truth came down an antiseptic conveyer belt to be deposited as pure product at the end. (p.101) [7]

Obviously, this traditional model does little to foster dialogue as it screams monologue. An alternative model is needed, one which radiates dialogue. Palmer (1998) provides this alternative in the form of a "community of truth" which places the "subject" in the middle surrounded by "knowers" (p.101) [7]. Palmer explains "In the community of truth, there are no pristine objects of knowledge and no ultimate authorities . . . The community of truth is, in fact, many communities . . . At the center of this communal circle, there is always a subject" (p.101)[7]. By switching truth from an object (as in the other model) to a subject, we make the subject the center of our attention and the result is that we give it respect and authority that is normally reserved for human beings. This relationship begins, Palmer argues, "When we allow the subject to occupy the center of our attention" (p.103) [7]. (See Diagram B)

Palmer elaborates on how the community of truth functions when he explains,

As we try to understand the subject in the community of truth, we enter into complex patterns of communication – sharing observations and interpretations, correcting and complementing each other, torn by conflict in this moment and joined by consensus in the next. The community of truth, far from being linear and static and hierarchical, is circular, interactive, and dynamic. (p.103) [7]

Diagram B



Given this model, I am left with a third and final challenge – how to create and nurture a community of truth in my classroom.

## **6. RIDING THE BUS**

My challenge seemed daunting. How do I address dialectic without power, foster diverse literacies, address hidden curriculum while removing the critical consciousness and subsequent fear fostered in a class such as Gender? In order to confront and address these issues in my Gender and Communication courses, I knew that I needed to create an environment where dialogue flourished, the culture of fear disappeared, and the community of truth emerged. This was not going to be easy. I realized that I was going to have to accomplish these goals by laying some ground rules and establishing a presupposition for all discussions that everyone in the class would need to understand and agree with. I also had to lay these ground rules through dialogue and not monologue. My solution came in the form of using a metaphor of riding a bus.

On the first day of the semester, I informed the class that we would all be going on a bus trip this semester. I announced that we would be taking a ride south down Highway 1 along the coast from Portland to San Francisco. The story is as follows:

“We will all be boarding the bus for the same destination – San Francisco. Some of you will get on the bus and sit in the front row where you can look out the front window of the bus and see everything possible along the way. That is what you know, what you do, and what you are comfortable with. You will take in everything around the bus and see every detail and embrace it all. Some of you will get on the bus on the left side. That is what you know, what you do, and what you are comfortable with. As we travel south,

you will look out the window on the left side and see the mountains and the trees and all the beauty the hillsides have to offer.

Some of you are going to get on the bus and sit on the right side. That is what you know, what you do, and what you are comfortable with. As we travel south, you will look out your window on the right side of the bus and see the beach, the ocean, the seagulls and maybe some dolphins or sea lions along the way. A few of you are going to head right to the back of the bus to the five seats in a row that look like a nice bed. You are going to lie down and sleep the entire trip and not see a thing. That is what you know, what you do, and what you are comfortable with.

When we arrive at San Francisco, we will all have gone on the same journey together and we will all arrive at the same destination together. But some of you will get off the bus and say, “Wow, what a journey, those mountains were incredible!” Some of you will get off the bus and say, “What are you talking about? There were no mountains on that journey, all we saw was this awesome ocean.” The left side mountain people will exclaim, “What do you mean no mountains? That’s all there was for hours and hours. There wasn’t any ocean!” Someone will eventually turn to a front of the bus person and ask, “Did you see the mountains?” And they will respond, “Oh, yes I did, it was wonderful!” Then an ocean person will step in and say, “What about the ocean – didn’t you see the ocean?” Then the front of the bus people will reply, “Oh, yes, we saw the ocean too and it was wonderful as well!” While they are all standing there arguing, the back of the bus bench people will exit the bus and say they have no idea what either of these people are talking about.

How can this be? How can a group of people all take the same journey together on the same bus, yet have such completely different perspectives of what happened during that journey? The key is “perspectives.” Just because the mountain people did not see the ocean does not mean the ocean is not there. Just because the ocean people did not see the mountains does not mean the mountains were not there. Just because the back of the bus people did not see any of it does not mean none of it was there! It is all real and it is all valid.

I hope that during this semester you get to look over at the other side of the bus. If you are a mountain person, I hope that you can at least learn to glance over at the right side and see the ocean. You do not have to like it and you do not even have to enjoy it. I just want you to look over and say, “Hmmm, I did not know that was there.” The same thing goes for the ocean people. Every now and then, I just want you to glance over at the other side of the bus and see that the mountains are indeed there.

For some of you, my desire is that you discover that the ocean is there for the very first time. And not only do you discover that it is there, I hope that maybe a few of you scoot over and sit in the seat on the right side for a while. Some of you may even say, “Hey, this is really much better than the mountains. I think I will sit on this side of the bus for the rest of the trip.” I hope the same thing happens for some of you ocean people as well. This will happen in part when you on the ocean side of the bus begin describing what you see to the people on the mountainside of the bus. You people on the mountainside of the bus do the same for the people on the ocean side. For those of you sitting in the front of the bus, I expect you to help everyone else by describing what you see from your perspective since you see both sides at the same time. Then maybe, just maybe, those of you who are in the back of the bus, if you can at least just listen to the descriptions – you do not even have to look out any windows, just listen to the conversations – I hope you can at least understand that the descriptions you hear are very real to the people describing it for you.

Just because it is not on your side of the bus does not mean it is not valid or very, very real for that person who is on that side of the bus. So, are you ready? Let's ride the bus!!"

This inclusion of the "back row sleepers" is a very important piece of the puzzle because it helps to remove power from the situation. When given the option to not engage the front, left, or right sides of the bus the student does not feel forced to have to engage in the journey. While no one should get to "ride the bus for free," the use of power and/or force is not teaching or learning. By being enrolled in the class, the students must go on the journey but the goal is to try to remove any power or pressure to "have" to engage in any paradigm shifts.

At the beginning of each class, I write a brief lecture outline on the board. At the top of the board, every day, I always write, "Let's Ride the Bus," "The Bus is Ready to Roll!!" or "The Bus is Leaving the Station!!" I remind the student's daily of our ride together. This sets the foundation for classroom discussions. When a topic is addressed that someone says they cannot relate to, I remind them that they are looking out a different part of the bus right now. When two people disagree on a topic, I can remind them that they are merely looking out different sides of the bus right now. Neither one is right nor wrong – in fact, they are both right in their views. It is not a right versus wrong issue. It is merely a "what side of the bus are you on" issue. Falling back upon this metaphor has allowed me to diffuse many a potential conflict in the classroom. The opportunity to teach tolerance toward diversity is quite obvious.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

By using something as simple as a metaphor of riding a bus, I am able to address all of my challenges. By embracing multiple perspectives and allowing each person to share their stories, we find ourselves in the middle of dialogue. The students begin teaching each other and the class begins teaching itself. As the dialogue flourishes and students begin to feel safe, the culture of fear disappears. When each story is validated, there is little fear of failure. When no one is allowed to invalidate or belittle a story, fear of rejection is diminished. When truth is collectively shared through individual stories, a community of truth emerges. Truth is no longer an object to be passed on by an expert to some amateurs. Truth becomes the central subject around which the entire community gathers and discovers and explores. Hopefully, somewhere along the line, as a result of all of the above variables, the struggle for power dissipates.

Once when a male student expressed his support of rape myths (look what she was wearing, she deserved it!) a female student was able to speak up and tell her story of being raped while wearing a sweat suit. The male saw out of the other side of the bus and even changed seats. But only because a community of truth existed and the culture of fear had been removed. He brought a dialectic based on a paradigm of power but because power was not a dominate tool in the classroom, a rape victim felt free to engage in dialogue. Literacy's were shared and understood and voices were expressed.

Once, when a female student shared that she did not mind being whistled at and honked at by passing cars, another female spoke up and shared her story of how that type of activity led to her being sexually assaulted. The first female was able to see how the act of objectification could dis-empower a person and cause another person to want to oppress her with power. This hidden curriculum went beyond anything I

could have prepared or planned for that day. Males in the class also heard how most of the women were hurt by this type of intimidation and expressed that they had no idea it was so hurtful.

One time when a male shared that from his side of the bus, he enjoyed women used as set decorations in advertisements, a woman shared her journey into eating disorders and her shattered self-esteem because she could not look like the models in the ads.

Not everyone changes seats on the bus. In fact, some students embrace the back row. This raised a daunting question for me: “what do I do when a student does not experience a paradigm shift or does not learn?” In time, I began to see it in a different way. Any perceived lack of change was still a teaching victory for me. The dialectic is possibly so threatening that some students chose not to engage in it. They chose silence to be their voice. This demonstrates to me the lack of power in the class. These students do not feel threatened by the dialectic and are content with silence. They do not feel defensive nor do they feel the need to defend themselves. They feel free to choose to disengage. This can only be possible when fear and power are absent.

There is an ancient Chinese proverb that proclaims, “When the pupil is ready, the teacher will appear.” Forcing a student to learn introduces power in to the classroom. When that happens learning and teaching stop and the teacher disappears. Riding the bus is an attempt to create the best possible environment for a resistant audience.

Change can be very scary and threatening to many people. A course such as Gender can require a student to have to confront change in his or her ideologies. The threat of that change can create resistance in the classroom. Teachers must be aware of the roots of that resistance and be prepared and equipped to handle it in a healthy a constructive way. When faced with resistance, cultivating a community of truth can diffuse a great deal of the hostility projected into the course and the professor. A simple metaphor such as riding a bus can go a long way to cultivating a culture of truth in which each person can be humanized and valued.

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