English Teachers as Guerrilla Warriors

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As Paolo Friere (1970) posited, teaching is an inherently political act—one that necessarily involves issues of ideology; what and how we teach cannot help but represent political and thus ethical choices. Contemporary research and scholarly philosophers have shown that *all* curricula has as its underlying foundation an ideological base; even math and the sciences are rooted in specific—and often positivistic—views that are themselves ideological. The fact that much of the crux of educational reform focuses on improvements in these areas above all others itself represents ideological preferences and biases. Ideology, politics, and ethics are certainly inherent in the English Language Arts, where students are taught to use a wide variety of literature to explore endearing truths and cultural values; to write for personal, social, and political purposes; and to explore and critically challenge their own and others' assumptions. All of these acts are politically charged.

Ironically, however, English teachers are all too often discouraged—tacitly and overtly—from exploring and confronting controversial ethical issues. This is especially true when ethics and controversy intersect, as they so often do in pluralistic and diverse societies. Ethics are complex, messy, and sometimes even contradictory. They serve as the very bases of our identities; exploring ethics scholastically therefore runs the risk of exposing us not for what we espouse to be, but for who and what we really are. Openly discussing controversial ethical issues in the classroom is an anathema for many parents and administrators because it might expose students to issues the former would rather pretend do not exist (but that our students are already conscious of). The avoidance of these issues in our ELA classrooms—

the only place where many students have the chance to experience an open and academic exploration of the issues that affect their lives—is, I posit, an anathema to the teaching of critical thinking; it is a silencing that ultimately proves hegemonic.

Though controversial issues permeate our daily lives and thus influence our identities and behaviors (Connell, 1989; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Trudell, 1992), and though they play an essential role in history, politics, and literature (Foucault, 1990), teachers often go to great lengths to circumvent such issues when they do arise in current events, in literature, or in daily classroom interactions and discussions. Their rationale for so doing, especially in an era of increased educational conservatism makes sense. Fear permeates teachers‘ curricular choices (in the increasingly few instances when they have such choices). They are both tacitly and overtly discouraged from using in their classrooms any texts that might result in complaints from unhappy parents or which might provide fodder for conservative attacks on public schooling. Instead, teachers are encouraged, if not strictly required, to stick to the safe corporate curricula supplied to them by their district (Apple, 1991; Segall, 2003; Stevenson, 2008; Author). The influx of this large-scale corporate curricula—created at great costs and thus marketed to sell to the largest possible audience (Apple, 1991)—only serves to further silence controversy by avoiding controversial issues that might offend statewide or district-level curriculum buyers (Apple, 1991, 1993). Thus K-12 teachers are both limited by the curriculum they are required to teach and by their fears of addressing controversial issues outside of this official curriculum.

Unfortunately, we know from research that avoiding controversy in texts and in current events—and the discussions that they can prompt—ignores the realities of students‘ lives, eliminates copious possible texts from inclusion in the curriculum, limits students worldviews, and serves to alienate students from schooling (because they fail to see the

connection of the activities they pursue in their classes to the real world). What is worse, such curricular censorship serves to push an essential part of the human experience into the realm of the taboo and, via silence, perpetuates misconceptions and stereotypes and promotes unhealthy attitudes and lifestyles (Connell, 1996; Epstein, 1997; Francis, 2000). Though politically expedient for teachers fearing for their jobs, censoring and silencing honest scholarly discussions of sex, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, gender dynamics, politics and religion (among numerous other issues) is ultimately unethical. Furthermore, such censoring also ignores what can and should be a powerful pedagogical tool. Gender roles, sex and sexuality, violence, and issues of power are interwoven throughout literature, music, and popular culture.

Just as importantly, these are topics that clearly affect students on a daily basis. Anyone who has spent even brief periods of time in secondary schools knows that adolescent students‘ curiosity is at a peak about virtually anything that is controversial– their curiosity naturally leads them to focus on the sensationalistic. Thus, English Language Arts teachers—who focus learning around literature and around personal expression through writing—are uniquely situated to help students learn and grow through scholastic exploration and open discussion of controversial issues. Their curricula—both official and unofficial—could and should serve as a starting point for the examination of larger societal and ethical issues. Literature and current events are natural places to begin these kinds of discussions (Schultz, Jones-Walker, and Chikattur, 2008).

For this to happen, however, teachers must either be given far more autonomy for what they teach—a highly unlikely proposition given the large-scale distrust for teachers bred through constant public attacks on their performance. Leaving aside the obvious public-school privatizing agenda of Betsy DeVos, former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan,

whose title prior to joining the administration was not Superintendent of Chicago's public schools but was rather Chief Executive Officer, repeatedly and vociferously attacked schools, teachers, teachers' unions, and schools and colleges of teacher education. It is clear that large-scale and research-based educational reform, reform that is not based on a business/accountability model, is so far removed from the dominant educational paradigm as to be silenced completely. In this climate, teacher autonomy has become an anathema; instead, reforms are focused on controlling teachers and curricula. Similarly, with the public's confidence in our schools and in our teachers eroded by frequent public attacks and from intentionally misleading data, teachers and teachers' unions have even less power than previously. Thus, open revolt against educationally-repressive policies is impossible. In this toxic climate, and more importantly for the benefit of student learning, teachers must find ways to circumvent the very systems in which they work while at the same time remaining important parts of that system. Thus, to engage students in the ‚real' issues that affect them (and interest them) in the curricula, teachers must, I argue, take on the role of the surreptitious guerrilla warrior.

Like true guerrilla warriors, teachers must work within the existing system to bring about changes–changes that begin locally but can, if done well, expand globally. They must take the charge of teaching individual students and individual classes to think beyond the hegemonic and corporate curriculum and thereby begin to empower their students. Guerrilla warrior teachers must themselves critique and engage their students in critiquing use very curricula they are assigned. Teachers must supplement corporate curricula with controversial texts in order to engage their students in critical literacy to highlight the narrowness of thought extant in such curricula. Rather than demand rigid adherence to paced curricula they must instead teach students to question the very purposes of education (so that students do

not fall into the trap of viewing education solely as preparation for a career and solely to fit into power dynamics that already exist). Just as importantly—and especially in the case of the ELA teacher—they must use literature and writing to validate the voices of those left unheard (or silenced) in official school curricula. They must begin to get students to see that the language arts open doors to new worlds and new experiences.

Unfortunately, it is only in such a surreptitious manner that many, if not most, public school students today will have any opportunity to see that literature (and education in general) does truly represent totality of the human condition. It is only in such a manner that students will be exposed to new ideas that question the status quo (a consumerist, falsely meritocratic status quo that has tended to be a disservice to too many of them and their people). And it is only in such a manner that many students will begin to realize that their experiences are represented in the curriculum–that their identities, beliefs, and struggles are shared. It is only in such a manner that teachers can again begin to regain control over the profession of teaching.

This position will, no doubt, appear radical to many. Like all such propositions, it is political and thus highly charged. Therefore, adopting the stance of the guerrilla warrior teacher is not to be taken lightly or to be adopted without careful consideration of both its underlying epistemology and its dangers. It requires that the teacher believe in the goal of such an approach: to both engage students in literature and writing that really means something to them *and* to get students to challenge dominant ideologies (including those taught as part of the schools "official curriculum"). It means that teachers must question their own complicity in the greater hegemonic system, looking for the ways—both conscious and unconscious—that they reinforce traditional ideologies and social norms.

Being successful in such an endeavor requires prudence and careful consideration of

the risks and benefits associated with challenging the status quo. It requires a questioning of the very ideals underlying the approach (critical theorists must, after all, be critical of themselves and critical toward critical theory). Similarly, it requires recognition that the existing curriculum (and the greater system of which it is a part) does contain valuable information and ways of transmitting that information. In our zeal to enact positive changes, we must not discount those aspects of the existing curriculum that do challenge students to think. Students should certainly understand many—if not most— of the content presented in such texts is valid and can be used for pedagogically sound purposes. They must, however, understand them with or through a critical lens. In this sense, the existing scripted curricula can serve as a means for deconstructing the very ideas it serves to support.

Though the way of the guerrilla warrior is by definition difficult, it may be the only way for today‘s teachers to truly engage students in secondary ELA classrooms and in literature itself. It is indeed a sad commentary that truly creative teachers must resort to circumlocution in order to reach their students with content that is not overwhelmingly hegemonic (in content and delivery). But we must always keep in mind the ultimate goal of teaching: empowering students by teaching them how to make informed decisions that are not themselves overly influenced by the dominance of one set of ideological beliefs.

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