

# Teaching to Transform and the Dark Side of "Being Professional"

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**O**n a late afternoon in June 1972, my student friends and I walked out of the conference room where I had just barely survived a three-hour dissertation defense before the five members of my committee, most of whom had not read my dissertation. Their questions, all in areas of theory completely outside my work, were intended to be punitive. My chair (who had cowered before his colleagues) was smiling with relief. He held out his hand and said pompously, "Welcome to the club!" Shaken and exhausted, I saw his words as the final insult. I wanted to shout, "Take back your degree! I will never be a part of your 'club'!" But just in time I remembered: in the first semester of graduate school, I had vowed to spend my life sabotaging university privilege from the inside to transform it, and to never acquiesce to institutional violence against graduate students disguised as intellectual "training." My own experience ensured that I would never forget that vow.

Today those of us who have not succumbed to the privileges, power, and

ego-enhancement (small though these may be) of the corporate world that passes for "higher education" know that the university is in trouble. We are close to losing all that makes being there a worthwhile calling. If the university is to survive against the competition of online degree factories and today's multiplicity of ways to retrieve information and develop skills, it must dramatically change the way it accomplishes "education." Here I reflect on what my graduate students and I have envisioned and enacted in the past three decades—goals and experiences that offer insights into some of what I think needs to happen.

### *The context: Goals of teaching to transform*

For more than thirty years I have been teaching primarily graduate students in Hawai'i, New England, and California. For all but two of these years, I have taught as an anthropologist in the field of education. As such, I have been assigned exclusively to teach research methods courses: ethnographic and qualitative methods, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. Since 1991, I

have been teaching at the University of California, Davis, which is a politically conservative campus with a narrowly defined school of education. The challenge for me has been, under these constraints (both positive and negative), how could I enact my philosophy of teaching and of anthropology? That philosophy involves the following major goals.

First, *teaching for transformation*: I came out of graduate school with a vision that evolved from my experiences in the Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam war, ecology, and feminist movements. The first practical application of this vision happened during my master's degree work when I supported myself by teaching high-school English and journalism in a Catholic school where "troubled" mixed-ethnicity girls were

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sent to be "straightened out." What I discovered the girls primarily needed was to be heard, understood, held, and given a reason to hope. Teaching to transform means that learning and education are not about information, content, and "skills," but about transforming consciousness and working for social justice. It is about transforming the larger world of which the university is such a small part.

Second, the *teacher as catalyst*: The teacher's highest calling is to be a catalyst for learning and for students to grow and become who they will become. The teacher is not training anybody to do or think anything, nor to replicate himself or herself. We need to jettison the term "training" and, at the very least, replace it with the notion of learning through participation in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Lewis and Watson-Gegeo 2004). Being a catalyst includes demystifying research via an understanding that knowledge and science are socially constructed, while engaging students in practices that encourage analytic thinking, judgment, discernment, and compassion.

Third, *uniting the political with the spiritual*: This does not mean uniting the political with the religious. Rather, while cognitive science has thoroughly defeated the false mind/body dichotomy and thereby collapsed all of Western philosophy (Lakoff and Johnson 1999), it has promoted a new dichotomy, between the body-mind and the spirit. If we cannot measure it or locate a "mechanism," it does not exist, according to our socially constructed science. Thousands of years of mystical experiences in thousands of cultures somehow do not constitute evidence. Yet the age we live in suffers precisely because it is without a soul. Religious fanaticism and postmodern extremes of nihilism lead us nowhere. We need to recapture the vision of the Civil Rights and other movements that recognized the spiritual nature of human beings and the spirituality of social justice. For me, part of this involves my ongoing conflict with anthropology as a discipline that sees itself as an apolitical, value-neutral marriage of the humanities and social sciences, yet simultaneously the owner of other people's ontologies and episte-

mologies (cultures). Anthropology continues the colonial project in most of its relationships with "informants" and their "exotic spiritualities" even while promoting postcolonial thinking.

Fourth, *holism versus specialization*: We need to model for students a holistic rather than a specialized conception of knowledge, the world, and human relationships. We need to incorporate all of the human being, not just the reasoning intellect but also the creative and feeling artist. When we tell students, for instance, that they must focus more and more narrowly to produce a worthwhile thesis or dissertation, we are asking them to ignore or pare away all of what gives their work genuine meaning outside the walls of the academic libraries where most dissertations will be filed, because people outside the university will never want to read them even if they have access. Here I completely agree with the argument of feminist and postmodern positions—that peeling away the layers of a phenomenon to get to the core or focus is discarding what makes the phenomenon a phenomenon. It is just the sort of fragmentation that leads to failed community development and failed solutions in all other sorts of levels in the everyday "real" world.

So what steps can we take toward making the above vision a reality? What follows is a distillation of three decades of teaching experiments and hundreds of hours of intense conversations with graduate students, especially those who have been my teaching assistants and research partners, on how to teach for transformation and social justice, and how to engender critical thinking in the fullest sense. First I describe a limit experience (Tracy 1988) that figures into this discussion in a profound way.

#### *The limit experience: Constraints become freedom*

My teaching assistants, graduate colleagues, and I have always worked together to demythologize and humanize teaching, and to change the power relationships in the classroom. We had noticed—and continue to notice—that even among professors who tell their classes that they want the experience to be a "dialogue" or "multilogue," hierarchy is always immediately reimposed

through a variety of taken-for-granted classroom practices and values by which the university operates. Because they have spent at least sixteen years in schools before arriving in my graduate classes, students are thoroughly socialized into these very practices and values, and are fully complicit in reproducing them even when I would try to undermine them. The question was, what to do to change this vicious cycle? The irony was that when I received the Regents' Medal for Teaching Excellence at the University of Hawai'i in 1988, it was not just the content of my classes but also that other difficult-to-describe quality—egalitarianism—that led to the nomination by students and the Regents' bestowing of the award. I was far from satisfied with my classes, however.

A limit experience is an encounter through which we become acutely aware of the limits of our conceptions, perceptions, and proprioceptions by being pushed outside the invisible barriers around us that have protected us. It therefore engages our agency in a particular direction by forcing us to be in the world in a different way, and to experience the world in us in a different way (Watson-Gegeo 2003). At UCD my students and I had an opportunity to go much further in our thinking about teaching than we ever imagined possible by a profound limit experience that happened to me in 1994. I became disabled from being sprayed with a toxic agricultural herbicide while doing anthropological fieldwork in Hawai'i that summer. My understanding of the physical world and my way of being in it was drastically altered. I became severely chemically sensitive, my immune system was essentially destroyed, and a seizure disorder prevented me from going back to the Central Valley where Davis is located, due to the ambient pesticides in the air year-round. Since fall quarter 1995, I have taught full-time at Davis from my rented house in Berkeley, using videotaped lectures, telephone conferencing, individual phone calls, e-mail, regular mail, and visits and meetings with my students and classes at my home.

Also since 1995, I have had a continuing struggle with my university—especially my department and





school—which have attempted to terminate me (though I am a full professor with tenure) because I am disabled and cannot be physically present on campus.

This experience has been and continues to be a long nightmare. I have had support from outside my unit among faculty and administrators elsewhere on campus, as well as from professors and administrators in the University of California and California State University systems, other colleges and universities around the United States and the world, and from current and former students. My department and school have sometimes punished students who support me.

Despite the ongoing nightmare of the illness and the experience of what it means to be “disabled” in America and in the university, my limit experience has also made possible the rethinking of education and professionalism by my teaching assistants and me. Furthermore, it has made possible teaching and learning moments and processes that speak directly to the goals I have pursued my entire career. As we worked out our new way of teaching because of the constraints placed on us by a department that was setting me up to fail so that I could be dismissed, we also developed a critique of “professionalism.” Professionalism was part of the value system in the university that allowed me to be isolated from my departmental colleagues and that justified their desire not to find out what those in power in my department were doing to exclude

**Today we teach ethnographic and discourse analytic research methods as ways of being in the world.**

me and to try to push me out of my position. It also allowed them to never hear the story of another disabled colleague and friend of mine—like me, a person of color (I am Cherokee/white), although the primary actors in this situation were all people of color—who was successfully pushed out of her position in our department a year before I came under attack. The strategies that were used against her were the same strategies as those used against me.

Before discussing the rethinking of teaching that my graduate students and I underwent, I first describe the critique we developed of what we came to call “the dark side of ‘being professional.’” We are aware that others have critiqued professionalism, as well, but we were not aware of these critiques at the time we arrived at the following.

#### *The dark side of “being professional”*

Professionalism evolved over many centuries in the West to protect students and employees from abuse by those in power over them in a variety of career paths, and originally it included a sense of the sacred. However, all things can be turned to their opposite, and like the “dark side of the Force” in the *Star Wars* movies from which we drew our metaphor, we have identified the following as the negative and dangerous aspects of being professional.

First, professionalism is about *boundaries*: It is about drawing boundaries to protect one’s own privilege and position, and to keep other people out. For example, the boundary between professor and student supposedly protects students from abuse. But more often, it allows professors to disregard students,

and insulates professors from having to treat students as equals. Professionalism draws strict boundaries between the degreed and the nondegreed, in which experience, knowledge, and just being sensible does not count in the way that a diploma counts, whatever abilities or lack thereof that the holder of the diploma may exhibit.

Second, professionalism allows *surface politeness to cover hostile social acts against individuals*: Faculty who heard through students that “something bad was happening to Karen” looked the other way and did not inquire—it was not “professional” to ask authorities about Karen’s relationship with the department, or even to phone her to find out about her illness. More broadly, surface politeness includes such examples as a professor’s recommendation letter for a student or colleague that damns with faint praise. Everyone in the university knows how to read between the lines in such letters! Yet students are typically unaware that this kind of game is being played with their lives and careers.

Third, professionalism *masks incompetence while holding creativity at bay*: Professors have tremendous power over the work of students and untenured faculty, to undermine possibly threatening ideas or to derail student creativity that falls outside the academic norms under the current prevailing paradigm for “academic writing” or “mainstream research design.” In this way, the powerful forestall challenges to the quality of their own work while controlling the innovation of the less empowered. A professor’s ideas count for more than a student’s in almost any class or committee situation (assuming a student is allowed to sit on a departmental committee). In one particularly horrendous qualifying examination oral defense I witnessed, a professor told the candidate that as a student, he could not critique a particular theoretical position because he was not recognized as an “insider”—that is, someone who accepted the tenets and had published within the boundaries of that theoretical perspective! This reprimand surely contradicts the idea of the university as a place where ideas are freely debated.

Fourth, professionalism *distances*



ten: "Good, then. Never write something you do not believe just because it is the prevailing theory. You must be critical always, and our ideas change. But we must be true to our vision." It was because of Raymond (who left for England a few weeks later, but mentored me from afar) that I stayed in graduate school at all. I did not feel I had really graduated until at last in 1973, Raymond came through Honolulu when I had just returned from my first trip to southeast Asia. He listened to my stories that were definitely outside the "normal" realm of anthropology. Then he said, giving me an uncustomary hug for such an important British figure, "You really *have* become an anthropologist." His example of teaching has led me to push further, and it was Raymond I thanked from soul to soul when I was given the UC Davis Distinguished Graduate Mentoring Award in 2004.

### Thinking ahead

By working to regain the originally sacred intent underlying the concept of "professional," and by engaging our stu-

dents honestly in that process, we find one way of teaching to transform, teaching for social justice, and challenging the false consciousness created by the dominant discourses of our time, both inside and outside the university. It is only a beginning—only one door into a new world. But it is a meaningful use we can make of our knowledge of language and discourse. And it is one way we can hope to reinvent higher education so that it will not just replicate the current social order, but transform it while addressing the whole person of our students and of ourselves as faculty.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful to Jay Yarnall, artist and independent scholar, for his incisive ideas (which I have liberally borrowed) expressed in conversations as I worked on the section of uniting the political with the spiritual. Special thanks to Matthew C. Bronson, former student and faculty colleague involved in the evolution of the teaching I describe, for important comments on an earlier draft. The critique of professionalism was developed in a series of electrifying group meetings on teaching for transformation, held at my house in 1998, participated in by my former teaching assistants (now PhDs) Jane

Adan, David Alberto Quijada, Sarah E. Nielsen, Mi-Kyung Ju, and Bernadette McCormack Musetti. Other TAs and volunteers in my classes who contributed to the ideas here and have so greatly enriched my teaching are Timothy Larrabee (PhD), and Enrique Sepúlveda and Thao T. Mai (both currently writing their dissertations).

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