

Dorothy A. Haecker

*To think about curriculum and pedagogy is to ask the perennial questions, what (really, what!) should we teach, and how (really, how!) we should teach it. To think about these questions in the "borderlands" is to consider teaching settings in which students try to preserve their home culture in the process of journeying into the culture of the traditional American classroom. This article charts one teacher's journey from a monocultural to a multicultural curriculum and from the front to the back of the classroom. She uses the metaphor of curriculum as a mirror in which to see self and a window from which to see others, both in deeper and more complex ways. She describes the pedagogical uses of the theatrical devices of stage and mask, on and behind which students can learn to play with ideas and act in the "as if" mode so essential to real education.*

# Windows and Mirrors, Stages and Masks:

## *Strategies for the Borderlands*

### Prologue

I am sitting at the back of the classroom. It is a day of team presentations in Introduction to Philosophy. Groups of three and four students are prepared to answer questions about Aristotle and Descartes which I, their intrepid teacher, have put to them. It is Team Three's turn. They have a question that is alarmingly difficult. What is the difference between Aristotle's and Descartes' idea of nature?

A grin of astonishment and delight spreads across my face as the students do something wonderful. Anita holds a plant in her hands; Laura holds a clock; Billy holds a pool cue. Anita tells the story of this geranium's potential becoming actualized, through the energy and structure of its own internal being and the energy and nurture of its environment. See, it has to have the stuff inside it to make a geranium and not a jaguar, she says. But it also needs sun and rain and good earth. She steps back.

Laura walks across the front of the classroom with her clock that represents the passage of time. She tells us we are moving from the ancient to the modern world, an unimaginable twenty-two centuries. This takes a while.

Now Billy places a cue ball and a two ball in the

chalk rail under the blackboard. He hits the white one into the yellow one and it goes trundling off the rail and bounces on the floor. See, says Billy, mechanistic cause and effect. You hit it, it goes. No choice, nothing about potential-to-actual, just external forces. Get it? The class is intrigued, also smiling, impressed. The team has made their point. Their classmates applaud. Anita-Laura-Billy are radiant with their success.

I say to myself as I gather my books and scribbled notes from the day's presentations, it has taken all my thirty years to come to this place, this pleasure, this process of teaching. I go to my office and meander through memories. I've spent my career thinking about curriculum and pedagogy: what (really, what!) should we teach and how (really, how!) should we teach it. I try to put my memories in order, in communicable form, to describe the path that has led me to this rambunctious classroom and these amazing students. It's been a long journey from the traditional to the multicultural curriculum. It's been a longer journey from the front to the back of the classroom.

### **The Setting**

This scene has taken place at Palo Alto College (PAC), a young community college on the southside of San Antonio, Texas. I say young. We started ten years ago with 283 students. We now have over 7,500 students enrolled on and off a campus designed for 2,500. We are the first institution of higher education in our part of town. We exist because mothers and fathers from many neighborhoods spent years petitioning the community college district board of trustees and the city council to give their children a place to pursue their dream of a college degree. Their success meant that Palo Alto became the third college in the Alamo Community College District in our city. Parents literally walked the streets to distribute the first flyers about the first semester of our classes. Not for nothing is our motto "the heart of the community."

Our students are about sixty percent Mexican-American, thirty-five percent Anglo-American (though the Germans and Irish among us hate to be called "anglos"), and five percent African-American. We have only a very small number of Asian-Americans and members of other ethnic groups. Most of the Mexican-American students are bilingual. A small number of all of our students are from the rural areas south of the city. An overwhelming number of students are from the working class and represent the first generation in their families to attend college. This, by the way, is true also of the teachers

at PAC. We think of ourselves as one of the major pipelines in the country for Mexican-American students to transfer to four-year institutions. Though we have a full community college mandate that includes providing occupational and technical programs and certificates to our students, ninety-six percent of them choose to be in transfer-degree programs.

Palo Alto College is a college of the borderlands. Whether a student is southside or rural, brown or white, going to college involves a journey to another country. We call them "classrooms" for a reason. They as students and we as teachers are fiercely proud of our multi-heritages. We tend to be close to our extended families and threatened by the prospect of leaving their values, their ways, and their stories behind. Much of what we do at our college involves convincing our students that they are not in an either-or situation. The border goes both ways; they can learn to travel at will.

### **Act One: What (Really, What) Should We Teach? Journeying Toward a Multicultural Curriculum**

Twenty-five years ago I began working with colleagues and students in what were then the new ethnic and women's studies programs. We were first stunned and then electrified by the realization that traditional courses were laced with what we dared to call racist, sexist, and class-biased presuppositions. These were the foundational ideas that permeated methods and conclusions in every traditional discipline. I participated in a kind of Copernican and even Einsteinian Revolution within the academy. That which had been thought to be central was found not to be so. A curriculum based on the experiences and consciousness of a privileged few gradually, then precipitously, gave way to a curriculum with a multiplicity of perspectives. Here each of us would have to endure seeing ourselves as others see us and seeing others in the primacy of their own being. As I reflect on it, I can telescope the learning of these years into three stages, three moments of curricular transformation, each so valiantly recognized and with such difficulty practiced. First we had to absorb the shock that what we had learned and been teaching as universal knowledge was in fact partial and sometimes altogether misguided interpretation, coming as it did from a particular layer of a particular culture that regarded itself as the universal standard of culture. We wanted to change this, to alter what we taught to reflect the lives, experiences, oppressions, and contributions of those who were absent from or misdescribed by the established curriculum.

We knew even then that what we teach must be both mirror and window. Our students needed to study those who are recognizably like themselves, to see their own families and world views and aspirations reflected back to them in word and image. They needed to ground their own identities in processes, structures, and symbols that make depth and integrity, pride and achievement, possible. They also needed, however, to study those who are quite different from them, to look out on worlds they had never experienced or had hidden away, to see these others looking back at them, not always with affirming eyes.

### *Stage One: Tokenism*

We came to call our first attempt at a transformed curriculum tokenism. This was what I referred to as the “shake and bake” approach. We would just try to throw in some information about women or people of color wherever it looked like it would fit. Discovering that this information would fit anywhere at all was the triumph of this stage. It generally involved the selection of singular people of extraordinary accomplishments to hold up as models of and for the missing groups. In philosophy, for example, I talked about the legendary Diotima, teacher of Socrates, and Perictione, the ancient ethicist who happened to be the mother of Plato.

The trouble with this stage, however, was that the information given was generally fragmentary and relatively disconnected from the surrounding material. These exceptional persons often stood in midair, with no supporting cultural, historical, or social context in terms of which to understand their existence or their accomplishments. This tended to defeat the purpose of their presence as potential mirror and window, because teaching about them was anecdotal and brief, an interlude among the scenes of real importance.

### *Stage Two: Assimilation*

We moved from this moment to one that can be called assimilation. Here we addressed and to some extent overcame the fragmentary and discontinuous nature of tokenism. By this second stage, we almost always became involved in the development of new, often thematic rubrics that genuinely reorganized the old material as the new was assimilated to it.

This was a very hard process, because it involved tangibly leaving out something or someone we had been accustomed to teaching. I remember my own syllabus at this point had reduced the number of classical philosophers I

taught to make room for an entirely new section on feminist ethics and epistemology. This made real comparisons between traditional and contemporary approaches possible and provided a much deeper experience of window and mirror. I remember how astonished my male students were at the thought that they would study the contemporary female philosophers, Allison Jaggar and Sandra Harding. I remember how apprehensive my female students were, fearful that these strange, oxymoronic creatures would fall apart under scrutiny. And how relieved and delighted they were when instead the women philosophers held up.

One of the greatest benefits of this stage was also its greatest challenge. Making difficult decisions about what to put in and what to leave out clarified the basic values by which our material had traditionally been selected as important and arranged as meaningful. By confronting these choices, we found the political roots of the curriculum dramatically exposed. Conflicts with our colleagues intensified and sometimes became fierce territorial battles. Imagine how we felt when we realized even then that we had not gone far enough.

Assimilation eventually revealed to us its limits, because the guiding norms and values remained those of the traditional discipline and its traditional subject-matter. We realized that this stage was still adjectival rather than nominal. We taught, for example, women writers and black writers, hispanic politics and gay politics, feminist ethics and working class ethics, but we were trying to keep the traditional meaning of writer, politics, and ethics in tact. However, this new content strained the old categories, stretched and pulled them like conceptual taffy, and we began to glimpse the real depths of the changes under way.

### ***Stage Three: Paradigm Shift***

I can only call the third stage paradigm shift. Here we really began to call the foundational assumptions, methods, and standards of the traditional disciplines into question. In literature, for example, it was not only the existing canon that was challenged but the very idea of a canon. In sociology, the core term "class" reshaped itself as it tried to accommodate the complexities of race and gender. In philosophy, we questioned the meaning of pervasive concepts like "reason" and "objectivity." In science, we rethought the nature of "nature" and its ancient dichotomy with "mind."

This was a stage of vertigo, where old, familiar ground went out from

under our feet and we did not know where to stand. Here we discovered the incredibly intimate connection between the disciplines in which we had been trained and our own personal sense of identity. Some of my colleagues called this the “slouching toward Bethlehem” stage, because one did have the feeling that the center was not holding, things were falling apart and we could not see what beast was about to be born. Though I did not agree with it, I certainly understood the profound eruption of resistance to multiculturalism and all of the privileges—social and perspectival—it undoes.

For all of our disorientation, however, the legacy of this transformational process has been tremendously rich. Virtually every arts and sciences transfer course at my college reflects the passage of its teacher through one or more of these stages. As we have done so, we have experienced in our own selves the profound identity shifts that curricular changes evoke. No one who has taken any part of this journey can evade this realization.

We look at the students in our classrooms and we see the multiculturalism required in our curriculum. The textbook I use in Introduction to Philosophy, for example, has chapters on eighteen great thinkers. Together with some of the most famous traditional western philosophers, my students find The Buddha, Lao Tzu, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the feminist philosophers Susan Okin and Carol Gilligan. Because there is no way for us to study all eighteen in one semester, I ask my students to decide on ten. At first they don't believe me. You mean we're going to vote, they ask in amazement. Yes, I calmly reply. So they put their heads together and negotiate. How are we supposed to decide when we don't know about them yet, they ask. Ah, what a superbly philosophical question, I say. You know it was Plato who posed the dilemma: if I already know, then I don't have to learn, and if I don't know, how can I learn? They regard me with skepticism. So should I get my money back, one twinkle-eyed rebel asks from the back row? Well, say I, why not scrutinize the table of contents for clues and then ask me questions?

For several semesters now, I have been noticing that my students' own choices support my ideas about the importance of curricular mirrors and windows. They typically vote for philosophers who they think share their beliefs and those whose ideas seem to be diametrically opposed to their own. Secure in the commonalities, intrigued by the differences, they begin the semester with excitement about what and who they are going to study. The promise of an effective curriculum is in place.

## **Act Two: How (Really, How?) Should We Teach It? Journeying Toward a Student-Focused Pedagogy**

During the years we worked toward a multicultural curriculum, we also thought about how to transform our classrooms from the traditional teacher-focused space to an interactive student-focused space. I remember the early days of sitting in circles when lecturing was anathema and all professorial authority was regarded as oppressive. When I reflect on that time, I realize that in all these experiments, we as teachers were still focused primarily on what we, rather than our students, were doing. It took the cataclysmic erosion of my students' literacy, due in part to the media-drenching, book-abandoning society of ours, to start me on a longer and ultimately harder pedagogical journey.

Here I was, at the beginning of the nineties, with what I regarded as the perfect philosophy curriculum. Multicultured to the brim, paradigm-shifted, writing-intensive, these were syllabi for all seasons. For years I had talked to my colleagues about the impact of sensory overload on my students' abilities to read and write. I shared the general teachers' dismay over television addiction and noticed how much more likely it was for my students to sit between classes with a walkman and earphones than with their noses buried in a book. For years I had noticed they were sliding away from the abstract, general, and symbolic toward the concrete, particular, and literal. I tried to dream up more and more scintillating lectures, ever more engaging essay questions, convinced that if only I did better, all would be well. I remember the day it dawned on me that it was not what I could do but what they could do that mattered. So obvious, and yet all my years of effort had obscured this simple, at first devastating, fact.

I went away for the summer and stared at the mountains. What could my students do? I thought about the lively discussions at the beginning of class, when they were choosing the philosophers we would study. I thought about the deepening gloom that descended upon the class as we actually began to study them. Did we actually begin to study them? No, my students studied me studying them and winged it from there.

Only through a multitude of frank and open talks with students and much trial and error did I find my way to the back of the classroom and the wonderful story I told at the beginning of this essay. The discovery my students and I made together rested on how much more they wanted to talk and listen than to read and write. They were most comfortable, could perform best, in an

oral, not literate mode. I speculated about why this might be so, wondering whether their working-class, story-telling roots provided the explanation, or whether they were simply expressing in their own terms the nationwide shift away from print to electronic media. Regardless of the cause, however, I had to find a solution. I decided there was only one thing to do. Use their orality to build their literacy.

Once I realized this principle, I looked for modes of talking and listening that would motivate and inform higher-order reading and writing. I have made two favorite discoveries to date. The first is the stage. Now I know what the front of my classroom is for. It is the space where teams of students can act out skits, sketches, and presentations they have created together in response to a question I have given them. Of course, they have to read, but they read knowing that they will spend a whole class period talking about what they've read with their teammates and plotting and planning an "awesome" presentation.

In my ethics class this semester, the students are responsible for preparing a group issue report followed by a group issue skit for their final exam. Students choose their teams and their issue. They meet inside and outside of class to prepare a multifaceted report in which they present the strongest arguments they can muster on all sides of the issue. Once their written report is done, they must create a way to dramatize their issue to the class, making sure that they do justice to the conflicting positions. This assignment is not a debate. They cannot choose sides and compete with each other. They must each think through all sides.

It is interesting how many of my students have chosen to combine the idea of the stage with the creation of a mask, my second favorite discovery, a literal mask, behind which they can hide their actual selves and opinions and try on selves and opinions very different from their own. I remember two stunning examples.

I am sitting again at the back of the class. It is time for Team Eight to present their answer to the question, why does Marx say that religion is the opiate of the people? Antonio, an exceptionally devout Christian, is on the team and has expressed to me his discomfort with this philosopher in general and this question in particular. While giving him the option to change, I have also told him how important it is that he be able to consider even deeply opposing ideas, to see the arguments in order to strengthen his own. He has chosen to stay and walks confidently with this teammates to the front of the

class. They begin their presentation and it becomes clear that Antonio will play Marx. Just as he begins to speak, he raises to his face a mask he has made from a xeroxed picture of Marx. He gives an impassioned argument. The class is spellbound because they know Antonio doesn't believe a word he is saying. At one point he drops his character, peeks around the mask and says, it's still me, guys! We laugh.

It is time for the Capital Punishment team to present their final skit. They have set us up to expect a trial of a serial killer who eats his victims. We are a bit uneasy, hoping they don't go too far with this. The narrator sets the stage and in walk the actors. One carries a stuffed pig, another is dressed in a red cape, a third has on a wolf mask. We are treated to the trial of the big, bad wolf in which the mother of the three pigs and Little Red Riding Hood herself testify. The wolf, however, carries the day. All semester we have been talking about the idea of moral relativism, the position that ideas of right and wrong are relative to certain traditions and/or individuals and cannot be judged outside of those contexts. We have argued the strengths and weaknesses of this view at length. I despair of talking them out of it. The two victims have had their say, both giving impassioned pleas for the death penalty. The wolf takes center stage. My appeal, ladies and gentlemen of the court, says the wolf, is simple. I am a relativist! I am simply following the customs and traditions of my people, who have been eating pigs and grandmothers for quite some time now. The class roars. They get it. They really get it.

### Epilogue

It is through activities like these that my students are building their literate skills and their literate selves. They learn that they do not have to believe in an idea in order to think about it. They learn that in thinking about it, surprising insights are possible. They gain the confidence to think the hitherto unthinkable. They gain the courage to change their mind. They learn that education is not simply knowing what you believe but why you believe it, that just as I have learned education is not simply knowing what to teach but how to teach it.

## *Publisher's Advice to Contributors . . .*

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**Stylistics.** Manuscripts should be about 4,000 words, typed double-spaced on 8.5 x 11 paper, flush left and unjustified, with no hyphenation. Two copies of the manuscript should be submitted with a diskette using WordPerfect 5.1 for IBM PCs.

We are guided by *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Our goal is readability and consistency. Please observe the following conventions; it will greatly reduce the number of changes we have to make to set your article in type.

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**A few grammaticisms.** We prefer to see a comma before the final "and" in a series, but accept consistent anomalies. Please spell out in full the first use of any person or institution before using acronyms or last names. Don't use Dr. or Ph.D. Read up on the juxtaposition of periods, commas, colons, semi-colons, quotes, parentheses. Also on numbers, arabic and spelled-out; capitalization; gerunds; split infinitives. . . .

**Cavils notwithstanding,**

**We welcome your contribution!**