Listening Up: Reinventing Ourselves as Teachers and Students

Written by Rachel Martin
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Rachel Martin is a teacher of teachers and a teacher of students in and out of conventional classrooms. She has taught in the Women's School in Philadelphia, community writing projects in Boston, a community college in New Mexico, and a graduate program in an Ivy League university. No matter where she is teaching, she consistently seeks to excavate the social justice issues that affect students' views of themselves and their socially dictated identities. Her book is a glimpse into the journey she undertook to hone her classroom practices, a compendium of the strategies she employs in having writers write and revise, and a call for linking literacy issues to social action.

Like many progressive educators, Martin embraces the work of Paulo Freire, but she also offers a critique and an extension of his work. She finds his work inspirational, motivational, and an antidote to “traditional” pedagogy. His emphasis on student-generated themes and language is useful, but she wonders why his ideas haven’t moved more of the disenfranchised to social action. Her point is not to reject Freire’s ideas and work, but, rather, to encourage critical analysis of his work without being labeled reactionary. In some quarters, Freire, the revolutionary, is untouchable, yet if his work is so powerful, why isn’t it effecting more change? In particular, she sees poststructuralism and psychoanalytic theory as useful tools in extending and deepening Freire’s work.

Poststructuralism, with its challenge to binary ways of thinking and recognition of unstable identities, provides a window by which teachers and students can see their own complicity with oppressive ideas and understand power as a subtle web of relations, not as a singular force. Psychoanalytic theory may help explain why people resist or internalize self-actualizing analyses. What Martin doesn’t address is the power of material well-being and/or deprivation and its connection to self-interested social action. Understanding oppression, power, and the uses of language to create reality doesn’t insure a change in immediate material conditions, the object of those most severely oppressed.

Relying on an inquiry approach, Martin urges writers to probe their personal experiences by asking questions that lead them to identify large and frequently invisible social forces that affect their lives. For example, one of her students wrote a first draft about her grandparents’ home in South Carolina that emphasized how self-sufficient they were by baking their own bread and canning fruits and vegetables. After Martin’s open-ended questions (What’s the most important thing you’re saying? What just came into your head as you finished reading? If you were to keep writing this piece, where would you go next? Do you hear any voices? Is there a scene in your head?) and the writer’s revision, the essay resulted in a story about the grandparents’ resistance to the Ku Klux Klan, quite a different story. It isn’t much of a stretch to imagine how those questions resulted in the story that was behind the first draft.

In a different kind of example, she describes how a group questioned and subsequently challenged a library that was willing to finance the publication of a booklet featuring the work of adult and student learners and experienced writers from the local community, a community commonly described as poor
and violence ridden. At first, the group was excited about the prospect of financial backing for their project, but when the library advertised it as a work depicting the despair of the community, the writers took exception to that representation. They learned that the library intended to use the publication to increase its own funding and to depict the mayor as an advocate for the “illiterate.” When the library refused to change their promotional approach, the writers took ownership of the publication and prevented the library from publishing the booklet. Although the writers had to struggle to find funding, it was important to them to provide the public with a different version of adult literacy. Their actions may not have induced broad and immediate policy changes, but the students learned about effective political action on a local level.

As a writing teacher, Martin wants to develop ways that writers can analyze their own writing and discover how to challenge prevailing representations, as in the case of the library publication. As an activist, she wants to understand resistance to combating oppression, hence the emphasis on psychoanalytic theory. What is remarkable is that given the jargon that is usually associated with such theoretical constructs, Martin writes simply and makes abstract theories (e.g., poststructuralism and psychoanalysis) accessible, and, she would say, applicable to the classroom. The breach between theory and practice is nonexistent in her work, and she offers the reader effective strategies and the rationale behind them, mainly in the form of good questions. This is clearly not a cookbook of recipes, though, as she notes,

*When I hear a first draft in which the writer has made a point, but the point is very general or vague, I might ask, “Do you have a scene in your head?” or “Do you hear anyone’s voice in there?” or “Is there someone alive in there?” I could just ask the writer to create a dialogue or write a scene. The distinction between that and the questions I ask is subtle, but I think the latter invite people more openly to see what’s there that, once again, I can’t know.* (108)

Martin works hard to keep the writer’s aim, not the teacher’s, in focus. In addition to sharing the questions she has developed over the years for readers to test in their own classrooms, she also describes other techniques that she uses to help writers, such as guided imagery.

Martin’s background in community writing workshops has provided her with a repertoire for connecting literacy education with social action. Particularly useful for anyone who has wondered about how writing can be transformed into social action is chapter 6, “Creating Theme-Based Curricula: More Strategies for Reading and Writing,” where she recounts her techniques for generating themes. She explains how she clusters ideas and uses something she calls “myths and facts” to highlight the relationship between knowledge and political goals. In this strategy, the teacher reads a series of statements that have political implications and invites the class to agree, disagree, or be unsure. The teacher then provides the latest information on the topic. For example, she might use a statement that Asians constitute the poorest immigrant group coming to America. After the class indicates if they agree, disagree, or don’t know, she reveals the latest “facts” about immigrant groups. In this case, it is that it is immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are the poorest immigrants. Her purpose is to encourage a critical stance among her students and to demand facts, not “myths.” The discussion that ensues, usually located in personal experiences, certainly opens up issues about facts, knowledge, and how beliefs about others are formed.

While this book is a rich source for keeping social action on the agenda in any classroom, the feature of the book that stands out for me is the author’s insistence on the writer’s ownership of his own work, and the license and encouragement to continue to play with his words. Writing for Martin is as much an expression of freedom as it is an instrument of communication. Her book provides encouragement for teachers and students of writing while also giving hope to those who would use literacy as a tool for social action.

**Shirley P. Brown** is a member of the Philadelphia Writing Project’s coordinating team and the cochair of the National Writing Project’s newly formed Teacher Inquiry Communities Network. She taught English in the School District of Philadelphia for many years and is now the program administrator for the Bryn Mawr/Haverford College Education Program.

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