

Pedagogical Philosophy

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We don't need no education.
We don't need no thought control.
No dark sarcasm in the classroom.
Teacher leave the kids alone.
Hey, teacher leave the kids alone!
All in all it's just another brick in the wall.
All in all you're just another brick in the wall.

Pink Floyd (*Another Brick in the Wall*)

Pedagogical Philosophy

My approach to teaching has evolved over time in a conscious effort to become a more effective teacher. Like perhaps most teachers, when I first started teaching (longer ago than I care to remember ...) I was totally unprepared for the job (that I do remember ... embarrassingly). Graduate school prepares you for research; not for teaching. I suppose, like swimming, we are expected to learn how to do it when we are thrown in at the deep end. Besides, we have all seen plenty of good and bad teachers throughout our lives; we should know what to do. Somehow, it is not as easy as that.

They say that at the beginning of your teaching career you should keep one lecture ahead of your students. Problem is ... I was always one lecture behind. I plunged into a two-year plan, preparing all my lectures on the computer, complete with bibliographical references, like so many tiny publishable-quality papers (years later they still come handy in my academic writing ...). Oddly enough, students' evaluations of my teaching weren't getting any better. Was there something wrong with my pedagogic approach?

In the attempt to find an answer to that question I started giving out questionnaires to my students asking them for feedback on what they *really* wanted in lectures. And what they wanted was less words from me and more from them. They wanted more input, more open time for discussion. They wanted to participate in the production of knowledge. Fair enough. After all, they pay good money for their education. They ought to have a saying in what they are being taught.

There is only one problem with opening up the floor for discussion: what if I do not know the answer to the questions students ask? They could come from anywhere. Wouldn't that undermine my authority as teacher? Talking for one hour straight, filling up the space with my own words, carefully reading from a script, in a staged and controlled environment has the great advantage of giving teachers a sense of security, of

routinizing uncertainty.

But no sooner had I finished getting all my lectures in the computer that I started breaking my own rule of sticking to the text. Inevitably, I would see a sudden connection. I would let a student ask a question. And I would put my lecture notes down. Perhaps that physical act of putting down my notes, talking about something else, picking up the notes again (only to struggle to find my bearings in the text) gave students the signal that I was deviating from the chartered path, off the main road. In their evaluations students remarked: "he has a tendency to go off on tangents." Tangents? My most brilliant connections discarded as tangents? How could they not see? What was wrong with *them*?

Nothing, it turns out, was wrong with them. My lecture notes, so painfully arrived at, were increasingly becoming a straight jacket. And I was caught in the dilemma of reading out my notes (how could I do any better by improvising otherwise?) and losing students to their day dreams, or dialoguing with them and exposing the limits of my knowledge: AHHH! THE EMPEROR WITHOUT CLOTHES!

And yet that idea of upholding authority in the classroom, consciously or unconsciously, made me uncomfortable. Sociology is fundamentally a critical discipline. Myself, I wanted to be a critical teacher, committed to raising students' awareness of social issues (particularly, class, gender, and race).

Opening up the floor for discussion implied acknowledging the limits of my knowledge. I had no problem with that; no problem with an honest acknowledgment of ignorance. However embarrassing at times, I never hid behind the façade of pretentious knowledge. But a critical view of the social world required an ability to see the body *and* the shadow, the light *and* darkness, the other's point of view, the wider social relations in which we are involved. It required, in other words, far greater knowledge of the social world than graduate school had trained me for (basically ... as a statistician). I plunged into years of critical reading. At first, it was all about class (and nation states) in the Marxist tradition. Gender and race came later. With the help of Michael Apple at Wisconsin, I started reading widely in the field of education, particularly critical pedagogy.

For a few years I fumbled, somewhere in between reading my notes (although I do not believe I ever did; that would have even bored me!) and dialoguing. Increasingly (perhaps as my knowledge and my confidence grew), I just brought my notes along (for comfort), hardly ever looking at them and opening up the space to students' probing questions.

Slowly, a new approach to teaching was emerging. I was succeeding in subverting traditional classroom practices. I would walk into a classroom for the first time and say to students: "My name is Roberto. You are welcome to address me by first name. But you can call me 'professor' if you really wish." I would invite students to speak up. "Don't

be afraid to interrupt my train of thoughts. I have few thoughts in my head and certainly no trains.” Every once in a while I would ask them: “What do you think of this?” In the typically dead silence of the class I would say: “OK guys. I am just gonna sit here until you speak up. I get paid for this anyway. In fact, *You* pay me. Would you go to a club (discotheque ... in my days), pay good money to get in, only to lean against a wall and watch everyone else having fun? This is your time; it is your money. I tell you what. Those who speak up get their names put on the board.”

Sooner or later, the heavy and uncomfortable silence of the class would become too much to bear and one of them would break down and make a point. “What’s your name?” And I would faithfully put it on the board (amidst timid laughter). That would open up a run. Names would go up on the board, quickly filling it up. From that moment onward, I would try to remember the students’ names and to address them by first name at every interaction. A typically anonymous classroom experience would suddenly become full of names, full of interactions. What once was a monologue became a dialogue, a conversation where all were invited to participate and, most importantly to have a laugh, to have fun, to like the classroom atmosphere and look forward to coming back next time.

To this day I can hardly give even a one-time lecture without asking students for their names, without engaging with them in a dialogue, however brief and fleeting, without inviting students to look at the light and the darkness of things, the body and the shadow, to look at me as a *white male* (*but* Italian: nation-state!) positioned physically in opposition to them, hiding behind a lectern, filling the vacuum with words that purport expert knowledge. I cannot help inviting them to question that *expert* knowledge (me!?). I do remind them that, perhaps, if they allow themselves to think that they have no knowledge, that I am *the* expert, one day ... they may let me tell them what to do in the name of that knowledge, of that expertise: may be go to war for *me*?

In this changed pedagogic style of my classrooms as a dialogue with students “going off on tangents” lost its meaning and I never saw those comments again in the students’ evaluations of my courses. Indeed, tangents had become the core of my pedagogic style, making connections between different aspects of social reality, between events differently located in the social, cultural, and historical world (the link between past and present, history and biography, in Mills’ words). A carefully planned first lecture at Oxford in Political Sociology on power (one dimension, two dimensions, three dimensions ... Dahl, Domhoff, Lukes, ...) was thrown out of the window by my urge to take advantage of the context: a huge old room full of oil paintings. I had my usual introduction “Hi, my name is Roberto Franzosi; you are welcome to call me Roberto. I will try to remember your names as much as possible. I am here to talk to you about power for the next four lectures.” But then, I suddenly deviated from my script (the lecture notes! My security blanket). I couldn’t resist asking students the question: “What is wrong with this room?” Many things, it turned out, were “wrong” with that room. And one thing certainly was the trail of old paintings of stuffy old *men* carefully encircling the

room high up on the wall. Of course, every bit that was wrong with that room had every bit to do with power. It took four “lectures” to discover it, but we got there in the end. Along the way, we discovered the first, second, and third dimensions of power and the familiar names that go with it (Dahl, Domhoff, Lukes, ... but also John, Paul, Anna, Jennifer ... the students’ names that went up on the board).

Little by little, I had all the makings of a critical pedagogy: participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, democratic, dissocializing, researching, interdisciplinary, activist. By 1992, after nearly ten years of teaching, I must have been successful enough to be selected as one of The Best Professors at the University of Wisconsin as Chosen by the Students, out of hundreds across 194 departments in the University. Professors were evaluated on eight criteria: 1. This professor was knowledgeable and clearly conveyed the knowledge; 2. this professor made me re-think my opinions and beliefs; 3. this professor was open-minded, non-biased, and respected opposing ideas; 4. this professor included all relevant groups of people and ideas in the curriculum; 5. this professor was approachable outside of class; 6. this professor provided feedback on a continual basis, not just at the end of the semester; 7. this professor provided an opportunity for students to interact with and react to each other during the lecture; 8. this professor affected my life in a positive way. To be selected you needed at least 98% of the answer in one category. I was informed that I was the only professor to have scored above that threshold in all categories, although they chose to put me down for item 4, 5, and 7.

Not surprisingly, I never did like survey courses meant to cover an entire sub-field of the discipline (Political Sociology, which I taught for years). I used to tell students that survey courses are like those organized tours of Europe, ten days through ten different countries. “If it’s Wednesday, it must be Belgium.” Jetlagged and tired, you got one day mixed up and you end up with the Coliseum in Paris and the Eiffel Tower in Madrid. In my courses, even surveys like Political Sociology, I have always needed a running thread, a story point. With surveys it is easy to lose the plot. Teaching for me is a way to illustrate mechanisms rather than provide extensive surveys; a way to shed light on how specific social mechanisms work. Teaching for me is an exercise in critical thinking; it is a way of raising people’s awareness of social mechanisms, of how these work, of how they affect people, and, perhaps more to the point, how different mechanisms affect people differently, but unfortunately in consistent ways.

Yet, a pedagogy of this kind, for all its focus on empowering audiences, is not without its pitfalls, without its dangers for the audience. Nothing seems to be going on in those lectures. Like in a talk show, people in the class just seem to be talking. Of course, occasionally, I do throw a name up on the board, a reference. I do (rarely) give out handouts that bullet the “important” points made, important for tests and exams that is. After all, knowledge in universities (or schools) is never for yourself. It is not enough to know what power is; how it operates, through which mechanisms; how it affects different people differently (but rather consistently). No, it is not enough to have critical

knowledge. You have to be able to “prove” that knowledge in an exam. You have to be able to sell it at a good price to an examiner. And any sale worth its salt must have a proper packaging of the goods. In education, that proper packaging consists of the proper citations, of the familiar names, theories, arguments, evidence. In this sales pitch, knowledge becomes commodified (indeed, a commodity you sell on the market). And the ultimate step in that process is the sale of the degree on the market: a straight-A student is worth this much, a C-student this much. And schools (and universities) function like egg sorters: grade-A eggs, medium, small. For critical teachers not to be aware of the market implications of knowledge is to do a disservice to their students. One more time, you have to focus on the body and the shadow, the light and darkness, the critical and the marketable.

If the students’ evaluations in my early years complained about tangents, in later years they had different complaints. “Why should I have to listen to what Paul, and Laura, and Maggie have to say? They know nothing! Why doesn’t the professor just tell me what he knows?” “It is hard to revise for exams for this class because I have very few notes.” This reminds me of a Doonesbury’s cartoon I had pinned to my office door: several frames show a classroom with the teacher up front spewing out words as if there were no tomorrow, and kids frantically writing it all down; the frames are full of “scratch, scratch, scribble, scratch, scribble, scribble”. On the last frame, outside the class, a friend asks one of the kids in the class: “How did it go today? What did the teacher talk about?” “Oh, I have no idea,” was the answer, “I was too busy taking notes.” Is that our choice as teachers? Get the kids to fill out notebooks of stuff they will never remember, or simply teach them a method, a way of thinking, a way of approaching social reality ... perhaps, with an empty notebook? I tell students that “what goes on during the hour of weekly lectures is nothing compared to what goes on in-between those hours.” If I don’t succeed in turning them on to knowledge, I have failed as a teacher, as an educator. It is in-between those lecture hours (or talk-show hours?) that the hard work of filling the notebook goes on. Without students’ input outside the class, critical pedagogy risks being a waste of time.

One final point of reflection. Teaching and writing – they say in the profession – teaching and research don’t go well together. No doubt, the more you teach, the less time you have for research. And if you work like me – getting obsessed with something and thinking about it single-mindedly – teaching does distract you from that focused attention, teaching does break up that continuity of thoughts and ideas (Ah! We are back to the train!). But let’s face it. On a daily basis, there is only so much writing you can do, before your brain turns into mush. Teaching can be a welcome distraction from the solitude of writing. Routines change with time and location. In Madison, free as I was from immediate family care, I was part of the “night crowd,” as my colleague Joe Elder used to refer to us (himself included), working in the department till the wee hours of the morning. It all changed in Oxford, when Anna Giulia was born. From a night owl, I turned into an early bird, a habit that has stuck. I did my most creative work in the dead silence of Wellington Square between 3 am and 7 am.

No doubt, preparing new courses, diving into new literatures is a major distraction from research. Those months dedicated to reading a new body of literature cuts deeply into the time left for research. But that is taking a short-term approach to one's research agenda. In the long run, I have found theory and praxis, teaching and research to go hand in hand, to reinforce each other, to stimulate each other. The teaching of new material has consistently proven to be the conduit of new research ideas, the springboard for more engaging and more scholarly writing.

And the very heart of my pedagogical philosophy – a critical approach to knowledge and the tangent as the main road – has become the tenet of my own scholarly production. In both *The Puzzle of Strikes* and *From Words to Numbers* I take a very critical approach to the production of scientific knowledge (alerting the reader to what I know and what I do not know, highlighting the legerdemain I do in the name of science), while at the same time passionately trying to push the frontier of that knowledge. In *From Words to Numbers* I pursue the alchemist's dream of *omne omne est*, everything is everything, the tangent leading to another tangent, and another tangent till I am back to the starting point (although that never stands still). That is the theoretical view of relational sociology, of sociology as social relations a view of sociology at the heart of Marx's, Weber's, and Simmel's work.

"We know more and more about less and less, until in the end we know everything about nothing," I wrote in *The Puzzle of Strikes*. That is the end of the road of "pure" research. Teaching has forced me to learn the connections between things.