

# When the Distressed Teach the Oppressed: Toward an Understanding of Communion and Commitment

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Jane Tompkins' 1990 essay, "Pedagogy of the Distressed," decries the prevalence of what she calls the "performance model" of pedagogy in college classrooms—that is, a model, perhaps unconsciously, centered entirely on the teacher's performance in front of the students. She calls instead for a more student-centered approach, based at least in part on the model Paulo Freire (1970c) describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Tompkins' essay prompted a number of forthright responses. Most emphasized the difficulty of enacting Tompkins' recommendations for teaching because of overwhelming course loads; a lack of institutional prestige and/or support; students who just don't care; or a nostalgic and lingering fondness for performance pedagogy.

Tompkins' concept of performance-based pedagogy and the responses it occasioned indicate a healthy willingness among teachers of reading and writing to discuss pedagogy. Nevertheless, I remain troubled by attitudes toward students embedded within this exchange. Certainly Tompkins advocates using student-centered techniques; her invocation of Freire conjures up a powerful dedication to students. Freire's commitment to students, however, his *communion* with them, results not from mere technique but from his spiritual foundation in liberation theology. I will explore the implications of this idea first by considering how people have responded to Tompkins, and then by examining the links between her argument and Freire's in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and other, perhaps lesser known, writings. I want to raise the possibility that, while we may consider ourselves student-centered educators in a Freirean sense, we have, in fact, taken only tentative first steps on an arduous journey.

## When the Distressed Teach the Oppressed

Tompkins argues that English teachers are preachers, "indirectly," perhaps, "but always." The problem as Tompkins sees it is that "our practice in the classroom doesn't often come very close to instantiating the values we preach" (p. 653). In other words, English teachers talk the talk, but we don't—or can't—walk the walk and so are "distressed." Tompkins traces this tendency to what she calls the "performance model" of teaching, whose goal is "not to help the students learn but [for the teacher] to perform before them in such a way that

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they would have a good opinion of [him or her]" (p. 654). Performance teaching derives from the following psychological profile:

Many, perhaps most people, who go into academic life are people who as children were good performers at home and in school. That meant that as children they/we successfully imitated the behavior of adults before we were in fact ready to do so. Having covered over our true childish selves, we have ever since been afraid of being revealed as the unruly beings we actually are. Fear of exposure, of being found out, does not have its basis in any real inadequacies either of knowledge or intelligence on our part, but rather in the performance model itself which, in separating our behavior from what we really felt, created a kind of false self. (p. 654)

Academic life, at least as Tompkins sees it, is a haven for the hopelessly insecure, the demesne of the dysfunctional, the sanctuary of the socially inept. This pathology results in fear, and fear grounds the performance model: "[f]ear of being shown up for what you are: a fraud, stupid, ignorant, a clod, a dolt, a sap, a weakling, someone who can't cut the mustard" (p. 654). The profession itself, which values scholarship rather than teaching, further instills fear of pedagogy. Fear-based practice, Tompkins believes, causes teachers to transmit—although preach might be the more appropriate word—fear to their students.

Tompkins describes university and college classrooms not as social spaces conducive to knowledge-making but as theaters within which teachers, vanquished by fear, perform set pieces in ways that will make students (and, by extension, the institution) think well of them. These teachers, Tompkins implies, do nothing out of the ordinary (practice *safe* pedagogy) and certainly offer no critique of themselves, what's happening in class, or why it's happening. Tompkins depicts higher education as a Möbius strip of mediocrity focused on teachers' fear-induced, narcissistic insecurity. Further, this creature eats its young, so to speak, in that students take up this same attitude—that is, of performing tricks to please an audience. Teachers and students become atomized objects of schooling, rather than its integrated subjects.

To counteract this situation, to invalidate the performance model and relieve the distress, Tompkins borrows from Freire's idea of education for critical consciousness and so recommends a student-centered approach based on rules of thumb such as, "Trust the students"; "Talk to the class about the class"; "Offer what you have"; "Don't be afraid to try new things" (p. 659).

*College English* solicited and published a number of responses to Tompkins. Few were overtly negative; instead, most followed a familiar pattern: Tompkins makes a wonderful point; I identify with her/welcome her to the conversation about teaching; BUT. This "but" is usually followed by a critique centered on her rules of thumb. Michael Carroll's response (1991) is typical. He welcomes "Pedagogy of the Distressed" but chides Tompkins for overlooking "the realities of English instruction at the college level as it is generally practiced" (p. 599) and for depicting an ideal reality that obtains only for securely established professionals (p. 600). Tompkins' students, the ones with whom she practices student-

centered pedagogy, doubtless received “the attention they needed” in high school and are thus better prepared for college than Carroll’s are. Carroll argues that “Tompkins’ students do not need her attention in the same way that less privileged students in the lower division in public institutions need the attention of their teachers” (pp. 599–600). On the one hand, Carroll has a good point. The student-centered course that Tompkins describes as the “most amazing” she had ever taught was, in fact, a graduate course. Certainly, teachers can make particular assumptions about the preparation of graduate students that they cannot make about undergraduates, no matter what their high school experience. But from a Freirean perspective, student preparation simply isn’t an issue. As Tompkins (1991) notes in her response to Carroll, Freire worked with illiterate Brazilian peasants. These peasants were, to use Freire’s terminology, “submerged in reality,” buried within an oppressive structure. The peasants believed, for example, that they deserved to live in slums; that they deserved to drink tainted water; or that hail stones were the souls of unbaptized children sent plummeting to earth by God to punish the sinful. Nevertheless, Freire and his literacy teams taught them to read and write. The program’s success led to Freire’s imprisonment as an enemy of the state after the 1964 military coup. Claims about underprepared students seem petty when considered in this context.

Terry Caesar (1992) examined Carroll and Tompkins’ exchange and used it as a context to discuss two “rarely discussed” aspects of the profession: “institutional privilege and success.” According to Caesar, Tompkins can say the things she says because she works at Duke. Moreover, we must all “avoid . . . the discrete suggestion of the vulgar truth: Duke gets better students than New Orleans [Carroll’s institution], and faculty at Duke can do things with them that are scarcely dreamed of at New Orleans” (p. 474). At the three institutions where I’ve taught during my career, average entering SAT scores have ranged from 700 to 1200, not including open admissions. My point, though, is that at all three institutions the stories teachers tell about students have been basically the same: Students just aren’t as bright as they used to be; they’re passive, boring, whatever. It may indeed be the case that Duke admits better students than New Orleans, but student-bashing seems to be a popular pastime no matter where one works. Never mind institutional prestige.

### An Ethical Question

By drawing attention to the dangers of performance pedagogy, Tompkins demands that teachers think about students, that teachers take them seriously as learners. Further, when she invokes Freire, she invites us to consider an ethical argument. Tompkins shows how revolution and education are integral to Freire’s thought. But Freire’s pedagogy has other goals, spiritual ones. North American followers of Freire typically see only the political aspects of his work, while overlooking the profound influence liberation theology has had on him. Theology is a meditation on a religious faith. In the Roman Catholic tradition, theological work has typically been performed by the clergy as a scholarly undertaking. In other words, theology happens behind the library’s closed doors and most usually produces written text. Liberation theology, on the other hand, is very

much a worldly pursuit in which all people perform theological work. People do theology by working together to free themselves from an unjust and alienating reality and, in the process, practice salvation. Liberation theology is not, therefore, simple reflection on the faith; it is Christian action upon the world—Christian praxis to transform unjust and alienating social structures—followed by theological reflection on that action.

More specifically, liberation theology critiques the domination and injustice extant in Latin America. The liberation critique traces this situation to an internalized alien cultural model—that is, capitalism—and its rapacious quest for private property and money. Because capitalism precludes the equitable use by God's children (all humanity), it provokes what liberation theologian Galilea (1979) calls “frustrating, alienating desires” (p. 171), and, according to liberation Gutierrez (1979), “ruptures our friendship with God and our brotherhood with other human beings” (p. 21). Free humans regard other free humans as slaves, treat them as “tools,” and deny their humanity.

This situation is sinful because it prevents humans from fulfilling their potential for salvation, communion with each other and with God. How, then, does liberation theology propose to vanquish sin, to bring people back into communion? Liberation theologian Planas (1986) contends that “what is needed is an altruistic ethic that permeates not only the individual but the entire culture, and places the needs of the entire social family (including the individual's) ahead of one's own.” Thus, a person will “think and act socially (the Christian concept of brotherhood)” rather than selfishly (p. 134). Gutierrez (1973) adds that “sin demands a radical liberation, which in turn implies a political liberation” (p. 176). Praxis accomplishes this liberation, transformative, and Christian action upon the world.

Education for critical consciousness, the process Freire calls *conscientização* (conscientization in English; literally, “making conscious”), grows from this context. Freire argues that humans are beings with relationships with the world, with each other, and with God. For Freire, humans are “uncompleted” beings, conscious of their “incompletion” (1970c, p. 27). Freire sees God as a transcendent “Absolute,” a presence in history who calls people, “limited, unfinished, and incompleting as they are,” to share in His creation (n.d., p. 13). Further, humans are bound to God, and our relationship with God provides the model for our relationships with the world and each other (*Educação como prática de liberdade*, as cited in Elias, 1976, p. 25).

According to Freire, humanity's task, its “ontological and historical vocation,” is to be “more fully human,” that is, to develop critical consciousness as beings who separate ourselves from and objectify reality, then act upon and transform it (1970c, p. 40). Humanity cannot fulfill its vocation in the context of oppression; however, oppression is “violence” that “interferes” with our task (p. 40). God stands *over* humans, but the relationship neither dominates nor domesticates; instead, “by its very nature,” God's relationship with humanity “liberates” us. So also human relationships with other people should neither domesticate nor dominate: “I cannot be the author of your salvation. . . . I have to live as a man among men!—discussing, acting, transforming, creating” (1970b, p. 17). For Freire, finally, the liberating relationship with God *incarnates* human

relationships so that they, “by their very nature,” liberate as well. To liberate is to fulfill human nature and enter into communion with other people and with God, creation’s and humanity’s source.

### The “Easter Experience” and Critical Teaching

Freire’s fervent religious rhetoric and devout Roman Catholicism, may no doubt discomfort many, more secular North Americans. Nevertheless, when he frames his ideas in religious language, Freire adds urgency to his call for social transformation and illustrates the passion that must inform one’s commitment to it. Consider, for example, his thoughts on what he calls the “Easter experience.”

For Freire, *conscientização*, education for critical consciousness, is the primary means of fulfilling the human vocation. *Conscientização* is Christian praxis mandated by God: “The process of conscientization leaves no one with his arms folded. It makes some unfold their arms. It leaves others with a guilt feeling, because conscientization shows us that God wants us to act” (1974, p. 29). Conscientization demands what Freire calls an “Easter,” that we die to be born again. But conscientization as praxis is itself an Easter:

This Easter [conscientization], which results in the changing of consciousness, must be existentially experienced. The real Easter is not commemorative rhetoric. It is praxis; it is historical involvement. The old Easter of rhetoric is dead—with no hope of resurrection. It is only in the authenticity of historical praxis that Easter becomes the death which makes life possible. (1972, p. 35)

Freire thus binds his pedagogy of the oppressed inextricably to liberation theology. The “real Easter,” according to Freire, a concrete historical fact, marks the “radical liberation” of humanity from sin and death. All liberation, be it Easter or conscientization, is praxis, and conscientization marks the emancipation of humanity from oppression and enslavement.

Critical educators must also experience an Easter, undergo what Freire calls a “conversion to the people.” These educators must constantly re-examine themselves and must never regard themselves as “proprietors of revolutionary wisdom” that they give to the people. To do so would simply reify oppression:

The man who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into *communion* with people, whom he continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived. The convert who approaches the people but feels alarm at each step they take, each doubt they express, and each suggestion they offer, and attempts to impose his ‘status,’ remains nostalgic towards his origins. (1970c, p. 47)

Communion with the people is possible only for educators who themselves possess Utopian—that is, hopeful and transforming—vision. As part of this Utopian vision, educators must prove their respect for and confidence in the oppressed

(1970a, p. 44). Critical teachers must be “in and with” student reality and not be submersed in their own fear-induced “performance.” They must, in short, trust their students.

## A New Ontology of School

Conscientization and critical, student-centered teaching are not the products of simple pedagogical techniques. To be authentic, education for critical consciousness must be a total commitment, a way of life, a conversion to the people. In Freire’s view, it demands an Easter, a radical, inexorable transformation that will not admit compromise: One cannot experience half an Easter.

Tompkins maintains that “the kind of classroom one creates is the acid test of what it is one really stands for” (p. 656). The Easter experience Freire announces constitutes just such an acid test. The Easter experience demands that we who call ourselves critical teachers undertake an ontological change; we must examine not only our practice but the theory and context from which practice emerges. Of course we should be wary of the performance model that Tompkins describes; I’m not convinced, though, that her call for student-centered classes offers an authentic alternative. Indeed, the idea of student-centered teaching limns the heart of “Pedagogy of the Distressed”; when we abandon a self-centered, performance model of teaching we turn, perhaps inevitably, toward students. But embracing a student-centered model does not guarantee that we’ll embrace our students, as the letters responding to Tompkins’ essay attest. Freire maintains that people can denounce oppression and announce radical transformation only if they have “grappled directly” with reality and are in touch with the dominated classes. Tompkins would no doubt endorse group work, sitting in circles, and holding class discussions instead of lecturing, as ways to grapple with reality and understand the oppressed. Unless these techniques are preceded *and* accompanied by existentially experienced ontological change, they amount to little more than gimmicks, or worse, performance-art teaching.

To enact an authentically student-centered pedagogy, then, critical teachers should first understand that praxis mustn’t be limited to the classroom. Liberation theology cannot be performed as an intellectual exercise behind closed doors; it must be shaped by the world and by people in the world so that it, in turn, can shape them. So also, liberatory praxis must pervade the lives of critical teachers. We cannot perform our social and political commitments in the classroom so as to be well thought of. Instead, we must integrate these commitments with our personalities and with all aspects of our lives, including teaching.

To begin, perhaps we should think through the idea that we may well be products of performance teaching, not just practitioners of it. Now that we have “come to power,” as Tompkins says (p. 653), we reproduce the performance model despite our best intentions because we’ve seen few (or no) alternatives. We don’t trust our students (even though we may believe we do) because our teachers did not trust us. We might also try to remember what being a student is like; we should study student reality not as some shard of abstraction, but as the lived, existential experiences of the women and men we teach. Further, student experience should be integral to pedagogy; we should not use pedagogy to enforce or

delimit it. Within the context of ontological change, Tompkins' "rules of thumb" become a scrim that barely obscures the reified performance model. Critical teachers must attest a new ontology of school to students, a new way of "being school," based on trust, commitment, and communion. Freire writes: "Hope is an ontological need" (1994, p. 8). Entering into communion with students means trusting them, accepting them and their limitations as they are, while at the same time working together to transform reality.

If we continue to believe, however, that our students aren't good enough, and that the better ones go to more prestigious institutions, we surrender to something more insidious than the performance model. We surrender to an authoritarian version of school that posits students as an unruly, ignorant Other to be conquered and brought to learning.

Given the institutional constraints within which we work, however, the reality of school into which we have been socialized, is commitment to and solidarity with students even possible? Speaking for myself, as one who occasionally joins in the student-bashing, I don't know. I do know, however, that these questions make me uncomfortable. They place my teaching practice and attitudes toward my students on problematic ground. And what's scary for me is the realization that if I want to be a teacher of and for change, a critical teacher, I might, in fact, have to change myself first. ☹

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