

PERFORMING VULNERABILITY TO CONTEST CYNICISM: MODELING THE POWER OF INQUIRY

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Abstract

This paper continues the conversation begun at the QUEST international conference on the topic of how to apply Socratic and Diogenic ideas to engage students in their own liberal education. How might we invite students to dialogue about the need to do the imaginative work of offering a vision rather than just settling for judgments? As a result of teaching and researching over the past year in Romania as a Senior Fulbright Scholar, my answer to this complex question is fairly simple: I try to perform vulnerability.

Keywords: Socrates, Diogenes, cynicism, skepticism, modeling, inquiry, vulnerability

1. An image and an invitation to converse

Among the Bucharest cabs and pigeons, the sun cracked the drab air of Piata Romana and I was glad to be there. Between handing out martisoare on March 1, 2013 and being charmed by Professor John Swales, I had the delightful privilege of participating in an international conference organized by Laura Muresan and Mariana Nicolae at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE). Our session, chaired by the esteemed Professor Rodica Mihaila with her customary good humor and grace, was called “Fulbright Roundtable: The Impact of Educational and Cultural Exchanges on Language Education and Research”. Our panel included 10-minute presentations by Elijah Ferbrache on the ideology implicit in the teaching and learning of an additional language, myself on the intellectual and everyday consequences of inviting students to pose questions, Mihaela Arsene on the difference between higher education practices in the US and Romania, Voichita Ghenghea on the effectiveness of different text types in technical writing, Ruxandra Dragan on returning to Romania with an American education on race relations, Stephanie Herzog on the practical implications of allowing students to direct the themes addressed by the reading materials. The passion and inventiveness of my colleagues’ attempts to locate students at the heart of the learning enterprise left me saying wow and hurray.

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Of equal relevance to me was Professor's Swales keynote talk on genres. Gracious and full of anecdotal wit, the much-cited Dr. Swales presented theories and applications of Academia's paradigmatic fixities. However, he also discussed several ways to intervene and change this tendency toward staid ossification through, for example, performative opportunities: "Genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them" (Martin, 1985: 250). What, then, cannot get done in the Romanian Academy and beyond? Walking out into the sunlight beating down on the famous ASE façade, I wondered where the institutional dialogue breaks down between the needs of institutions and the needs of twenty-first century students in Romania as well as – allowing for their various differences – in the US and elsewhere. The QUEST international conference has emboldened me to advocate more fervently and publically for the inclusion of students' voices in conversations about their educations. Spring is coming – whether we are ready for it or not.

2. Introductory remarks

This essay continues the conversation alluded to above begun at the QUEST international conference which occurred at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) on the topic of how to apply Socratic and Diogenic ideas to engage students in their own liberal education. Ideals such as intellectual democracy in the classroom, life-long learning, and the prospects of living/dying well will be addressed as we consider our best practices as teachers. This invitation to continue a transnationally important conversation will consider the challenges and opportunities broached when inviting students and mentees to pose questions – rather than responses – as assignment prompts and how doing so may instill successful learning habits in the academic and daily lives of our students.

If the most current language theories – such as performative speech acts and the putting to work of deconstructive readings – are right and the point is not to talk about mimesis but to mimic the absent border between inner and outer nature, then Socrates and Diogenes were onto something. If we permit the tracing of epistemological constructivism back to these ancient Athenians, how might we learn to use Socratic inquiry and Diogenic modeling to strengthen our teaching and mentoring?

The simple beauty of the Socratic method is also its power. It asks: why make a declaration when you can ask a question? A little later but overlapping, Diogenes tried to live his life as a model of what he understood as virtue, inviting others to learn from his example.

More practically: cynicism, as practiced in our present-day culture of more and more instant gratification and shorter and shorter attention spans, is one of the most intransigent challenges faced by teachers. How might we facilitate a dialogue with

our students about the need to do the imaginative work of offering a vision rather than just settling for judgments? How do we model inquiry while maintaining enough control over the direction of the class to allow us to use analytical rigor and cover the content professional standards demand?

3. There is power in diversity

I believe learning to wonder or to imagine are essential to working toward the noble aspiration of fair representation in a society, institution, or classroom that is diverse. Besides validating my personal philosophy of remaining open to diverse perspectives, my most rewarding classroom experiences have shown me time and again that the interactive teaching style is effective because it makes learning matter to students by inviting them to ask questions about which they care.

My current editorial projects began while completing my doctoral research into poetry as a kind of myth of origins and idiom as a kind of method. These anthologies focus, respectively, on how innovative form relates to biographical content of post-communist Romanian poets and on how twentieth-century and contemporary first-generation American poets' relocation experiences relate to their writing. *Biography after Communism: Romanian Poetry after 1989* includes work by a wide range of Magyar, Roma, and Moldavian writers as well as established poets like Ruxandra Cesereanu, Mircea Ivănescu, and Mircea Cărtărescu. My other anthology, called *First-generation American Poets: Biography and Innovation*, places the poets' own reflections on biographical influence next to their poems. It includes poets as diverse as: Mina Loy, Claude McKay, and Bei Dao. Alongside colleagues who identify as feminist, queer, and Chicana like bell hooks, Eve Sedgwick, and Sandra Cisneros, I take the crisis of representation personally.

As I see it, the central problem with postmodern multiculturalism is how to go about representing the simultaneity of difference and value. In the classroom, my response to the Saussurean problem of the arbitrary relation between the sign and the signified has been to invite students to dialogue as equals. This method fails over and over. However, perhaps our various kinds of failed attempts at intellectual democracy aren't complete losses since, in these discussions, students become aware of our need for a shared literacy and ethics. If the critiques of positivism no longer permit us to fail better, as Samuel Becket had it, perhaps we can fail differently.

To paraphrase the Indian literary critic and translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who offers the idea of "strategic essentialism", *strategic democracy* – one of the driving principles behind my course design – challenges participants (including myself) to identify reasons and provide evidence for our interpretations on a leveled playing field – to whatever relative degree such a thing is possible. In this

way (and in agreement with Reginald Shepherd, my first poetry mentor), I see the goal of linguistic clarity as an ethical goal. I work toward achieving it by asking students to question the text, their peers' interpretations, and their own progress as learners. In other words, I use the Socratic method to ask my students to reflect on whether they want to pose a question or declare a position. By inviting students to consider the divergent consequences of wondering and decreeing, we dramatize through roleplaying the effects of questions and statements. This way, we learn together how to enter a text through students' questions about the form, sound, or shape of the text within the relative safety of the semi-public commons of classroom discussions.

What I am calling *strategic democracy* also implicitly demands that we, the classroom participants and civil society, define and articulate a strategy for our vision of equality. We define our terms by holding ourselves and others accountable in classroom discussion and in public dialogue with the full knowledge that the writer's intention, the phenomenon of the text itself on screen or paper, and the reader's intention all contribute to the constitution of meaning. For me these are the roots of a genuine respect for "the other" as someone different but also as someone valuable.

4. There is power in philosophy

During my years in graduate school, teaching was as important to my intellectual development as my own studies. In places as far apart as Iowa City and Bucharest, I have had the opportunity to design undergraduate courses in creative writing, literature, rhetoric, and ESL as well as graduate seminars and workshops focusing on poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction. I taught my first class while a graduate student at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. It was a poetry-writing workshop that focused on mastering craft by emulating poets such as Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens. Offering each student extensive written feedback by pointing out evocative moments as well as opportunities for even more powerful treatment worked well enough. However, early on in my teaching experience, I noticed firsthand that students learn best from their peers. Since then, I have made learner-centered learning the heart of my rhetoric classes, seminars, and workshops.

Themes illustrate (and perform) the power of multiple perspectives in all of my rhetoric classes and seminars. Having a theme around which to oscillate, such as the rhetoric of authority or Modernist poetics or immigrant literature, invites readers and writers to conjecture with an open mind while also seeking summative, analytical, and synthetic precision. A theme works like a lynchpin, showing the value of changing one's mind as a reader during the drafting process. In mini-workshops my students learn to re-see their own words within traditions established by reading published writers. Using rhetoric textbooks like *Signs of Life*

in the USA or *Ways of Reading*, students get exposed to historical and intellectual developments like Semiotics, Feminism, and Critical Theory while gradually coming to terms with how reading and writing implicate the reader and writer.

In addition to the use of themes to organize my courses, I avail myself of instructional technology and live in-person events to connect students with local culture whenever I teach a seminar or a workshop. For example, when I teach in Chicago, I focus on Chicago poets and prose writers like Patricia Smith and Aleksandar Hemon by using YouTube videos and an anthology such as *Skyscrapers and Smokestacks* to establish historical context. One of my midterm assignments asks students to relate a live event to its textual version – students have written on events as diverse as spoken word performances at *The Green Mill*, blues shows, lectures, standup comedy, hip-hop, and poetry readings. Adventurous students often express stupefaction at the pleasure they find in performing such cultural fieldwork. While learners less apt to risk-taking will show subtle signs of pride when realizing Gwendolyn Brooks or Ernest Hemingway had roots in their city, adding an emotional component to their understandings. This way, cultural anthropology and the poetics of biography bring writers and their texts into the everyday lives of my students, inviting them to own what they learn.

At the University of Wisconsin, I had the opportunity to focus on designing courses in creative writing and at UC Berkeley, I taught and helped redesign a post-graduate craft-based workshop focusing on poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction. Together, as readers united in the pursuit of themes like authorial intentionality or the difference between form and content or multicultural hybridization in American literature, we read from collections including: *A Book of Luminous Things*, *The Art of the Story*, and *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Because readers make better writers, my creative writing students read as many texts that invite creative emulation as texts that prompt critical reflection including critical and philosophical writings by T. E. Hulme, Mina Loy, J. L. Austin, Theodor Adorno and others. While I do insist on carefully reading published texts with my students, by the final few weeks of the course we are working exclusively with the texts produced by members of the workshop.

Recently, I taught an American Studies graduate seminar called "Immigrant Literature: Biography and Innovation" at the University of Bucharest as Senior Fulbright Scholar. Our study examined how biography relates to formal innovation in the work of first-generation American writers such as Junot Diaz, Charles Simic, Ana Castillo, Gish Jen, Vladimir Nabokov, and others. Themes like this one percolate in my courses as questions guiding us toward analysis and synthesis, opportunities to discover how component parts can create literary effects and surprising networks between our writing and our lives.

5. Conclusions

Tone seems to me the most pertinent best practice to address in my exchange experience as a language arts teacher in both American and Romanian Universities. I have come to believe Literature seminars and Creative Writing workshops stand to benefit greatly by understanding more fully the differences between being a skeptic and being a cynic. Do we assess – others and ourselves – as a punitive measure or do we assess to encourage curiosity? It seems useful to think of tone in order to reflect on the differences between the vulnerability necessary to pose questions and the arrogance necessary to propose solutions. If this is a rhetorical question, then rhetorical questions are all we have. Emotional, psychological, institutional, and national intention seems like another way to suss out the vital and subtle distinctions between open-ended and dead-ended effects of linguistic common usage. What is the scope of the power of knowledge? How do we know if their liberal education has liberated our students?

How do we as facilitators of wisdom – not just vocational trainers – enter into dialogue with our students about doing the imaginative work necessary to offer a vision rather than just settling for the easy pleasure of judgment, with its inexpensive satisfaction of closure? Perhaps the study of Creative Writing can offer a path forward, if workshops are treated as occasions to consider both form *and* content? During my year in Romania as a Fulbright grantee, the way I have learned to engage my students' imaginations – not just their memories – has been to try to perform vulnerability. I have learned to seem vulnerable while not giving in to the utopian dream that my students are my intellectual equals. Perhaps it's personal maturity – it is about time – or the effect of cross-cultural exchange, but I have learned the value of performing as a persona. Or, rather, I have learned to perform that persona better. That being said, the principal ethical problem in theorizing pedagogical best practices remains: why do we think of teaching as more of a performance than mopping the floor or shopping at the mall?

How might we learn to use Socratic inquiry and Diogenic modeling to strengthen our teaching? As I have attempted to show, the Socratic method finds its power in its simplicity. It asks: why make a declaration, when you can ask a question? Diogenes tried to live his life as a model of what he understood as virtue, inviting others to learn from his example. Teachers might do well to follow suit. Effective leaders have come to understand that people learn from examples much more effectively than from sermons. So what challenges and opportunities arise when we offer our students the power to pose questions? Is it difficult to share the stage with students who are just learning to value their own opinions or who find themselves struggling to summarize or connect ideas, their own or those of others? It is excruciatingly difficult and slow going. However, by doing so we proffer a consciousness-in-common with respect to the difference between teaching others how to think and propagandizing for an idea. How might inviting students to pose

questions of the canon, of each other, and of us instill successful life-long learning habits in their academic and daily lives? How might we model inquiry to enrich the lives of others?

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