

Imagining the Future: Growing Up Working Class; Teaching in the University

By David Hursh

I never wanted to be a teacher. In school I constantly counted the minutes until the last bell, when I would be free to join the other boys playing whichever sport the season demanded. I measured my success not by test grades but by touchdowns and runs scored.

Therefore, I am surprised that for the last thirty years I have been teaching. But it is in teaching, in the crucible of the classroom, that one can engage in asking questions and making sense of one another and the world. It is in the classroom in which a gaggle of five and six year olds responded to my question of how the Grand Canyon was formed with the unexpected but understandable explanation of earthquakes and tornadoes. And it is in last night's classroom of doctoral students — mostly teachers and administrators — in which we deliberated over the effect that the current testing movement has on our ability to engage students in making sense of ourselves and the world.

How then did I move from being a working-class boy who experienced school as a digression from my

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real interest — sports — to someone who had made education his life work? In this paper I will describe my own understanding of the process. In particular, I will describe my own changing gender, race, and class identity within the context of an evolving political understanding. Further, I will note the difficulties I encountered from elementary school through college because I lacked, as a working class boy, the social and cultural capital of the middle class. How and why I became a teacher was a result of analyzing my own educational experiences.

My frustrating elementary and secondary educational experiences were followed by experiences in and out of school in which I came to imagine teaching as part of a larger effort to create a more humane world. While I was not so naïve to believe that developing new approaches to teaching and schooling would by itself change the world, I did believe, like John Dewey, that if schools incorporated democratic decision making, they could be places in which we learned to be democratic citizens. I, along with many others creating alternatives within and outside the public schools, and those active in the civil rights and anti-war movements, had a vision of a more caring, less hierarchical world. Then and now I wanted to reaffirm the possibility of teaching and learning as a way of combating a society that poet Adrienne Rich describes as smelling “of timidity, docility, demoralization, acceptance of the unacceptable” (1993, p. xiii). Rich sees “in the general public disarray of thinking, of feeling...an atrophy of our power to imagine other ways of navigating into our collective future” (p. xv). She laments that we have become a society “[w]here every public decision has to be justified in the scales of cooperate profits” (p. xv).

In 1948 I was born, along with my twin brother, into the baby boom generation and a working-class family. Neither my father nor mother attended college and, reportedly, my father was underage when he enlisted in the Navy near the end of World War II. After the Navy my father was a construction worker and later owner-operator of a small construction company (I sometimes worked for him as a day laborer). My mother worked at home until my father died at the age of 42, after which she worked in factories, grocery stores, restaurants. Now, more than thirty years later, she still works almost full time.

In the early years we moved in and around New York City but in 1954 we settled in Levittown, New York, the archetypal post-war suburb. Levitt, the developer, only sold his homes to Whites and had buyers sign a covenant that they would only resell to Whites until this practice was eliminated in 1968 as illegal (Brodkin 2001, p. 40). Levittown, presently a middle-class community, was initially a blue-collar community of World War II veterans working their way up in the world.

My early educational experiences were not auspicious. Family mythology has it that my twin brother and I almost failed kindergarten — I suspect in large part because we were inordinately shy — but were passed on to first grade because they didn’t want to see us another year. I did poorly in school until the end of second grade when my mother, in response to my query regarding how to add all the numbers on

the grocery receipt, did not tell me to wait until my teacher taught me how to “carry” in addition. Instead, in a few minutes, she taught me. The mystery of schooling was broken; knowledge for the first time seemed not to be something only possessed by experts. Learning was no longer inherently difficult. Subsequently, with my new skill and confidence, I became a math whiz and did better in third grade. However, as an elementary and secondary student I rarely felt comfortable in the classroom. Neither the goals, rules nor reasons were clear to me and I usually aimed to just get through the day without being embarrassed or punished.

While school was becoming tolerable, life outside of school proved to be equally challenging. It was soon after moving to Levittown that I first was challenged by what it means to grow up a working-class male.

Levittown homes were filled with young families and when school was not in session, children filled the streets playing games. The first test of masculinity came as the neighborhood boys chose sides for the daily stickball (and later touch football) game. Not only had I not played baseball before, but also as twins, my brother and I were the smallest and weakest boys of the bunch. We were chosen last with the complaint “do we hafta take him?,” a pattern that was to hold for several years. In response, we were determined to not be chosen last but to be one of the prized players chosen early. The desire to become a better athlete, along with my lack of confidence regarding schooling, led me to prefer athletics to academics.

On reflection, choosing athletics over academics had several advantages. While I never quite understood what it took to succeed in school, sports gave me a place in which I understood quite literally the “game” and knew what it would take to do well. Sports have often been an area in which boys find rewards not found in schools. A survey of thirteen to eighteen-year old Australian boys, reports Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), revealed that sports offered boys the:

Possibility of pursuing their own standards of excellence in ways they felt they had some control over...For many, playing sports was in a sense losing oneself into the sport completely. For that time, all needs were being satisfied; physical, mental, social and emotional. All other problems and life pleasures ceased to exist; being blocked out by this total involvement in sport. There was a sense of urgency and need to have this escape. It is an escape which they feel frees them to be truly themselves, and at their best. (p. 60)

Although I loved sports, I could not go out for sports in high school because I delivered afternoon papers in order to earn money for personal possessions and the books I came to love. Consequently, I only went out for high-school athletics my senior year, and that was in track and cross country because they did not require the previous experience of team sports like football, my real passion. However, I played daily in the streets and left Levittown after high school knowing that I had reached my goal: rather than being the last player picked I was more often the first.

Around the age of eight or nine I discovered books. Books were, in part, an

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escape from a world that was physically and emotionally dangerous: older and stronger boys and impenetrable social and school rules. Books also gave me access to a world beyond school and the streets. I began reading excessively. At home I collected my own library of paperback books, reading, among others, the novels of Aldous Huxley, Sinclair Lewis, George Orwell, William Golding, J.D. Salinger, Ian Fleming; mysteries by Agatha Christie, and science fiction by Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ray Bradbury. However, because reading was not something working-class boys talked about, I never revealed my interest in fiction to my teachers and only to a few of my friends.

Further, my writing skills were deplorable. In seventh grade I frequently failed the weekly spelling test, resulting in numerous detentions meant to prod me to study. In twelfth grade I managed to write a four-page essay that was one long incoherent paragraph. And while I read novels on my own, in English class the answers to teachers' questions about what we read seemed to me too subjective, therefore posing too much of a risk for me to raise my hand and offer answers. While I usually managed a 'C' in English, I failed one quarter.

In contrast, math and science were not only perceived as masculine subjects, they were easier because they had clear objective answers that can be determined using the proper procedure. Math and science, then, were the subjects in which I excelled.

Therefore, my primary goal entering high school was to get grades good enough to divert attention from myself and avoid detention, which would keep me from getting home to play sports. I began high school in the vocational track.

However, in the spring of my freshman year, a school administrator announced in the boys' study hall (we were divided by sex for study hall and gym) that a test (I was to later learn an IQ test) would be given for those interested in majoring in either architecture or electrical or mechanical engineering. Since the study hall teachers were prone to give detention *en masse* for boys throwing spitballs, taking a test seemed safer than study hall. On the test I exceeded the minimum score and began tenth grade majoring in architecture. At the same time, although I did not realize it until thirty years later, I was also admitted to the honors program.

Admission to the architecture program significantly altered my gender and class identity. Now I spent not only my time after school but also most of my school day in the company of males. Only two females enrolled in architecture with a few more in science and math. Further, since standardized tests scores highly correlate with social class, most of my classmates were from professional upper middle-class families.

During my senior year all my architectural classmates applied for college. They advised me regarding colleges to which I might apply and I sent away for applications. But when I received the applications, because I had never talked with anyone who had a baccalaureate degree (although clearly my teachers did) I did not know whether to fill out the pages for undergraduate school or, because I was a high school graduate, to apply for graduate school. I decided to fill out the front of the

applications, applied to undergraduate school, was admitted, and, because I had no way to evaluate programs, decided on Kansas State University, 1500 miles from New York City.

Before heading west, I had to earn money to help pay for college. In the summer between high school and college I began my first full-time job working with my brother in a factory assembling pool tables. It was in that and a subsequent factory that I first encountered race as an issue. In both factories salaried management were White and hourly workers were almost all Black or Puerto Rican. My brother and I became friends with the hourly workers, including socializing outside of work. As a factory worker I saw myself as no more intelligent than the other blue-collar workers. However, I was privileged because as a White college student the routine and demeaning factory work was only temporary. In school and at work I was becoming aware of class distinctions. In school middle-class students were knowledgeable of post-secondary education, had the cultural capital that I did not have. But in the factory, because I had the opportunity for a career rather than just a job, I was becoming middle class (Adams, Blumenfield, Casteneda, Hackman, Peters, Zuniga, 2000).

Further, attending university and doing so in Kansas heightened class and race as issues. First, because I was working class, I began college disadvantaged in comparison to most of the other students. For example, upon flying into Manhattan, Kansas for the first time late at night, I asked the taxi driver to drop me off at the return address printed on the envelope providing me housing information. Never having been to a college campus nor having any knowledge of dormitories, I did not realize until after the taxi departed that I was dropped off in front of the administration building, now closed for the evening. Upon rereading my mail and asking for directions, I learned that my dorm was a quarter mile away. I struggled off dragging my luggage behind me.

Not only did I not understand university housing, I did not know how to obtain course textbooks. While students arrived in class with textbooks, I sat without. Since, at the time, the university bookstore did not sell textbooks and I had not found the bookstores off campus, it was only when I finally asked students where they purchased their books that I learned that the bookstores near campus sold course texts.

While I might have had the ability to initially succeed in college, my unfamiliarity with college culture undermined my efforts. I nearly failed my courses that first year. But I learned that success in college depended in part on not what you knew but how you presented yourself in class. I came to understand that academic and economic success depended on more than merit. During my college years I both gained the cultural background or social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) necessary to enter the middle class and, at the same time, began to critique middle-class culture.

Almost simultaneously with learning how to succeed in college, I began to question whether university success was desirable. I became disillusioned with the university's silence regarding the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement

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(Fulbright, 1966). At the moment in which I was poised to enter the middle class, the counter culture critique of the middle class supported me in rejecting it as consumerist and oppressive (Roszak, 1968). Lastly, in contrast to my summer experiences working in factories, I was astonished by the lack of students of color at the university. Few students of color attended the university and those people of color who lived in the community lived literally on the other side of the tracks on the edge of town furthest from the university.

In the spring and summer of 1968, first Martin Luther King, Jr. and then Bobby Kennedy were assassinated and anti-war activists demonstrated at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. While I was naïve about the civil rights movement, my experience working with minorities in factories enlightened me regarding class and racial oppression in the United States. Consequently, I was shocked when, upon King's death, some university students celebrated and shouted, "Hooray the nigger is dead!" I was learning that racism exists and that the Chicago police would riot against demonstrators using their freedom of speech.

By the end of the summer of 1968 I had concluded that the United States was not "the best of all possible worlds" but was, in fact, a racist, classist, and sexist society. I was beginning to understand how my own working-class background made me less prepared for college and success than my more culturally and economically advantaged peers. Furthermore, I realized that democracy in America was and continues to be at risk. Such a realization required that I begin to think through the characteristics of a democratic society and how we might nurture them. Then, and now, one of my central concerns was what appeared to me the increasing difficulty of questioning the status quo and of imagining a better world. A diminished view of social change that focuses on technological improvement and the production and use of more commodities characterizes the post war period of the 1950s and early 1960s and our present time. Moral and political considerations of equality and the quality of life are rarely raised.

Surmising that the beating and arrests of protesters at the Democratic National Convention indicated that those in power feared that the protesters might have a legitimate critique, I began to examine more closely the history, policies, and politics of the Vietnam War. Soon thereafter I was organizing anti-war protests and teach-ins on my own campus. Such activities led the Nixon administration to assign a Second Lieutenant, from nearby Fort Riley, to tail me throughout the day and report on my activities. The Second Lieutenant enrolled in the existential philosophy course that I taught at the alternative university (more on later) and, after the last class, revealed that he was assigned to follow me, provided copies of his reports, and thanked me for an enjoyable experience.

While I hoped that the university might be more open to my political views than the Nixon administration, they were not. After the bombing of Cambodia, President Nixon, feeling that the conservative Midwest was a safe place to give his first campus speech, came to Kansas State University. The university and secret service prohib-

ited signs critical of the President, allowing only pro Nixon signs to be displayed. When a friend and I held up a sign that read *If you make peaceful evolution impossible you make violent revolution inevitable*. —John F. Kennedy, we were immediately seized by the secret service and removed from the building. Over the next few weeks the university and the state upped the ante, as both the university and the Republican candidate for governor threatened to have me arrested and expelled from the university. The Republican candidate lost but became Nixon's assistant attorney general and presided over the disastrous confrontation at Wounded Knee. Meanwhile, the university backed off. While I was following Senator Fulbright's advice, in *The Arrogance of Power*, "[t]o criticize one's country is to do it a service and pay it a compliment. It is a service because it may spur the country to do better than it is doing; it is a compliment because it evidences a belief that the country can do better than it is doing" (1966, p. 25), clearly neither the government nor the university agreed.

Nixon's Vietnam War policies led me to examine how particular political views gained dominance and legitimacy over others. I soon realized that such questions are essentially social and philosophical and that we all are, to varying degrees, engaged in social and philosophical analysis. I began to take seriously C. Wright Mills' (1959) description of sociology as the work of the sociological imagination, which is the process through which we examine the larger structural forces that affect our lives and make sense of our experience as not idiosyncratic but societal. It is the way in which we come to understand our *personal troubles as public issues* (Lemert 1997, p. 12).

Moreover, we are engaged in philosophical questions as we raise questions about the curriculum content and the organization of schools and classrooms. When we do so we are raising philosophical questions regarding the nature of knowledge (epistemology), the purposes of schooling and life (values), and the relation between individuals in schools (ethics). And, as in sociology, as we do so we connect the personal and the public. Maxine Greene, whose book *Existential Encounters for Teachers* (1967) was my introduction to educational philosophy, understands the relationship between the personal and the public. She begins *The Dialectic of Freedom* with this description:

This book arises out of a lifetime's preoccupation with quest, with pursuit. On the one hand, the quest has been deeply *personal*: that of a woman striving to affirm the feminine as wife, mother, and friend, while reaching, always reaching, beyond the limits imposed by the obligations of a woman's life. On the other hand, it has been in some sense deeply *public* as well: that of a person struggling to connect the undertaking of education, with which she has been so long involved, to the making and remaking of a public space, a space of dialogue and possibility. (Greene, 1988, p. xi)

Greene, as a philosopher, educator, and woman, both acknowledges the limits placed on her and us and aims to reach beyond them. She wants to rethink and reshape what we know, do, and value. "What I am describing here is a mode of

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utopian thinking: thinking that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in the world” (Greene, 1995, p. 5). She resists merely complying with the current social order and instead engages in utopian thinking that hopefully will lead to a better life for her and others in society.

In thinking through what I want to do as an educator and a citizen, I have tried to understand why people comply and submit to social conditions that limit their own and others’ understanding and growth and the difficulties we face in proposing “utopian” alternative futures. Furthermore, I have understood the plight of the individual and society as intertwined so that individual growth necessitates social institutions and structures that support that growth. In order to understand how society might support learning, it is necessary to understand what schools do and can do. For me, making sense of how we live and learn required becoming an educator.

Noting how Mills and Greene linked their own personal problems with public issues, I reflected on how formal education rarely helps people make those connections. As a sophomore I read Paul Goodman’s books, *Growing Up Absurd* (1960) and *Compulsory Miseducation* (1964), in which he criticized education for preparing students to fit into society and the workplace rather than to critique and reform it. Goodman denounced the educational system for not providing students with skills to analyze and change the world but, instead, “guaranteeing the right character” (1964, p. 21). It is in schools, he wrote, that

our citizens learn that life is inevitably routine, depersonalized, venally graded; that it is best to toe the mark and shut up; that there is no place for spontaneity, open sexuality, free spirit. Trained in the school, they go on to the same quality of jobs, culture, politics. This is education, mis-education, socializing to the national norms and regimenting to the national ‘needs.’ (1964, p. 23)

Goodman echoed Dewey’s criticism that education focused on the needs of business and provided narrow job training in the vocational track and the narrow academic focus in the college prep track (Weltman 2000, p. 184). He criticized the then New York Commissioner of Education for stating that: “The educational role is, by and large, to provide — at public and parents’ expense — apprentice-training for corporations, government, and the teaching professions itself. And also to train the young to handle constructively their problems of adjustment to authority” (1964, p. 18). Goodman detested the idea that education should be preparation for the needs of corporations and government, for fitting “people wherever they are needed in the production system” (1960, p. 4).

Goodman argued that the emphasis on meeting the needs of the bureaucracy caused many of our difficulties with adolescents. Schools offered adolescents few “worthwhile experiences.” Further, he deplored the post-war culture of production and consumption that “dried up the spontaneous imagination of ends and the

capacity to invent ingenious expedients” that “disintegrated communities,” and “destroyed human scale” (1962, p. 10). Such acceptance made it difficult to offer proposals to change schools and society. Consequently, he felt it was increasingly difficult to propose alternatives: “The structures and folkways of our society are absurd, but [most people feel] they can no longer be changed. Any hint of changing them disturbs our resignation and rouses anxiety” (1962, p. 6).

Educational institutions rarely assist and mostly undermine our ability to connect our personal or private troubles and the larger social structure. This is, as I have argued elsewhere (Hursh, 2003), because modern capitalist society assumes a consensus has emerged around valuing economic production and consumption over everything else, linked with instrumental rationality.

Yet Goodman was not quite so pessimistic in other publications. In *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals* (1962) he urged us to create alternative visions of the future. Similarly, Greene calls for a space of dialogue and possibility. Realizing that it is not enough to critique social inequities but to change them (Marx, 1932), I took seriously Goodman’s proposal that we develop communities and educational institutions that would connect the personal with the public and provide spaces for democratic dialogue. Further, as a working-class male I found more reward in creating institutions and working alongside others than in theorizing possibilities.

During my junior year in college I volunteered to assist at an alternative university in Manhattan, Kansas. This alternative university — then unfortunately given the sexist name of University for Man and presently called only by its acronym UFM — offered courses focusing on subjects neglected by the traditional university, such as courses on the civil rights movement, art and creativity, social change, and yoga. The courses were free, offered no credit, and could be taught or taken by anyone: area residents, high schools students, and university students and faculty.

At the beginning of my senior year I was hired as the assistant director to the program and worked for UFM the next three years. Besides offering the semester long courses, the other two staff members and I organized national conferences on developing similar post-secondary alternatives and on school reform. For the latter, we recruited as presenters noted educational reformers such as Jonathan Kozol (1967, 1972), George Dennison (1969) and John Holt (1964, 1969). I immersed myself in the educational reform literature of the time and began writing articles and speaking out for developing democratic schools.

My educational reform goals reflected my own class experiences. For me, how one succeeds in education had gradually become demystified. When my mother taught me how to “carry” in math I realized that learning did not have to be difficult. Upon reading, interpreting, and applying the ideas of Fulbright, Goodman, Green and others, I gained confidence that what sense I made of readings was valid. I began to think about how to transform schools into spaces in which students and teachers together ask questions about what is worth knowing and how we should learn. I wanted to explore how schools might be democratically organized to respect the

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experience of adults and the interests of students. It was no longer enough to talk about reforming schools, it was time to create new ones.

Therefore, I left UFM to begin an eight-year career (1972-1980) as an elementary teacher and director of two different private alternative schools. I began at The New School, Omaha, Nebraska, as a teacher's aide, became a full-time teacher a few weeks later, became head teacher-director during my second year, and left after three years to found my own school, The Living Learning School, in Manhattan, Kansas. I taught there for 5 1/2 years. As a teacher, I focused on several questions:

First, what is the nature of subjects in the curriculum? As I saw it, how we commonly think about school subjects overemphasizes the subject areas at the cost of recognizing that in our daily lives we deal with projects and problems that require a variety of abilities. As an adult I did not engage in "social studies" or "science" but, rather, used rhetorical, historical, political, and ethical analysis to understand and critique the United States' war in Vietnam.

Second, as educators we have inadequately reflected on the question of choice and freedom in learning. Early in *Education and Experience*, Dewey raised the question "What does freedom mean and what are the conditions under which it is capable of realization?" (1938, p. 22). Dewey did not conceive of freedom as the ability to do whatever one pleases but, instead, as action within the continuum of experience. George Dennison (1969), in describing his own teaching at The First Street School, wrote the following:

When adults give up authority, the freedom of children is not necessarily increased. Freedom is not motion in a vacuum, but motion in a continuum. If we want to know what freedom is, we must discover what the continuum is. 'The principle,' Dewey remarks, 'is not what justifies an activity.' We might say something similar about freedom: it is another name for the fullness and final shape of activities. We experience the activities, not the freedom. (p.4)

It is in pursuing answers to meaningful questions that shape and give meaning to our activities.

Third, how do students learn and what implications does this have for how we organize schooling? John Holt, in *How Children Fail* (1964), described classroom practices in which students, rather than learning as part of the process of being in and making sense of the world, store up facts to give back to the teacher. Teachers and students play the implied game of "guess what the teacher is thinking." In contrast, I wanted to develop a school in which adults and children together made sense of the world.

Lastly, what is the role of the adult in the classroom and the nature of adult authority? In reflecting on how we think about the relationship between teachers and students, we err when we assume that teachers must decide between asserting or withholding their authority. When teachers continually assert their authority, therefore tightly controlling the classroom experience, students grow to mistrust

their own experience and anxious to please adults. But if in the interest of giving students “freedom,” teachers withhold their authority, then students are navigating the world without adult guidance. Not surprisingly, Dewey wrote at length about the issue of adult authority, urging teachers not to impose their authority arbitrarily but to use their natural authority based on greater knowledge and experience to guide and assist students.

As an elementary teacher I explored and wrote about these issues (Hursh, December 1975, April 1976) and left elementary teaching satisfied that I had reached some tentative conclusions. I decided it was time to try to influence educational policy through other means and I became a curriculum specialist for the Midwest Sex and Race Desegregation Assistance Center at Kansas State University. I soon discovered that the center for which I worked was less interested in influencing educational practice than in appearing to make a difference. Fortunately, while at the university I began to spend time in the library reading the ideas of Michael Apple (1979), Ken Zeichner (May-June 1981, May 1982) and Herb Kliebard (1975a and b). Until then, the educators from whom I learned were not in the university but independent scholars and activists: Kohl, Kozol, Goodman, and others. Now, for the first time, I felt that the university had something to offer. I resigned my position as a curriculum specialist and began a doctorate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

As a doctoral student I gained a significantly more sophisticated understanding of educational theory and history, knowledge for which I am grateful and make use of continually. However, doctoral study was difficult because abstract university discourse further challenged my working-class less-than-academic roots. Further, there were few opportunities to bring to the conversation either my previous experience as a teacher or what we might do beyond writing papers and presenting at conferences to combat the growing regulation of teachers, students and the curriculum and the decline of democracy in schools and society.

Therefore, throughout my fifteen years as a university professor I have attempted to make a difference in educational practices not only through writing and publishing (see, for example, Hursh, October 2001, Spring 2001, 2001, 2003; Hursh & Ross, 2000; Hursh & Seneway, 2001) but by engaging educational policy makers. For example, while I have been writing about the way in which high-stakes testing marginalizes teachers’ and students’ experiences, I have also been active in the local community and beyond. Three years ago I helped establish the Coalition for Common Sense in Education, an organization of teachers, administrators, students, and parents dedicated to combating high-stakes testing in Rochester and New York. Our activities include working actively with state legislators to draft legislation permitting educators to use assessments other than the Regents exams, writing editorials for the local media regarding the negative impact of high-stakes testing, and organizing presentations by educational leaders and policy makers critiquing the rationale and consequences of high-stakes testing.

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Because it is crucial that those with a progressive voice enter the public debate on education, I have been a candidate for the Rochester City School Board, have served on numerous city school district and mayoral committees, and worked closely with other progressive education faculty at area colleges.

Lastly, just as I tried to rethink elementary teaching, I work hard at teaching my university courses in a way in which we learn from one another and develop new knowledge about the world. In my doctoral courses I try to lay bare for students how power works in the university so that they can navigate doctoral studies and university professorships. I do not assume that students know how one becomes a professor or that publications are judged differently for the purpose of promotion and tenure depending on whether or not they appear in a top tier journal or in an edited book. As one student wrote in a course evaluation, I “debunk the myths of doctoral research and scholarship.”

Because I am a faculty member at a Research I University (ironically, a university to which I would never have been admitted as a student), my political work and teaching detracts from the only activity that counts towards tenure and promotion: quantitative or qualitative research published in Tier One journals. However, I became an educator not because I wanted to forget my own experiences growing up working class but to examine and transform the social and school structures and practices that reproduce inequality. It is a conscious decision, at some risk to my career, to critique the corporate and conservative influence on education and to create less hierarchical and more democratic spaces, spaces “of dialogue and possibility” (Greene, 1998, p. xi).

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