On Teaching through the Millennium

What do students want? The more time I've logged in as a professor at a university that prides itself on good teaching, the less certain I am of the answer to that question. I know I want to tell students about what I find important, interesting, and useful in the world. I know I would like to see them all become activist citizens, young feminists, committed to equal opportunity for all races and ethnicities, willing to climb tall first-growth trees to save the environment, and much, much more. But can we transmit to the next generation the values devised from our own struggles, the lessons learned from our own mistakes, the knowledge gained by our own post-Enlightenment approaches to understanding the world? This is always the challenge teachers face, one made symbolically more poignant because we are at the foot of that heavily trafficked bridge into the twenty-first century.

I am poised beyond the halfway mark in my life and academic career, with many of my parents' generation now dead and with those remaining numbering among the senior seniors. Being of "that certain age" has pushed me to reflect on how the previous generation shaped my own life. Perhaps those reflections can, in turn, help me better understand my own role as a teacher of following generations. I am a "red diaper daughter"—and on one side of the family a red diaper granddaughter too. I grew up with stories of struggle—how my grandfather was exiled to Siberia for taking part in a May Day parade in Tsarist Vilna, how Russian Communists taught my grandmother to read in secret woodland meetings, how my father hid an axe handle under his coat when he went to the second Peekskill Concert featuring Paul Robeson. (The first had been attacked and disrupted by police and an anticommunist mob.) Our parents, despite—or perhaps because of—the 1950s, made every effort to educate us as good communists. During some summers I attended the interracial Pioneer Youth Camp, where counselors took us to meet Eleanor Roosevelt and we enjoyed regular visits from Pete Seeger and other progressive folk musicians. During the winters I frequented a discussion group developed

1 See Kaplan and Shapiro 1998; Mishler 1999.
especially for the red kids of Westchester County (not actually an oxymoron!). We read Marx, Engels, Lenin, and others and found friends and refuge from an often hostile and alien world.

Recently, I had a conversation with another red diaper daughter in which we talked about the inevitable deaths in our parents' generation. These “grown-ups” were remarkable, she said, but although we've done them proud, we are not them. We are not them because our world is not theirs. To begin with, there is no longer a single, believable international movement in which to place our faith. Instead there are dozens of movements—reproductive rights, gay rights, civil rights, environmentalism, the shelter movement, and many more. The Enlightenment concept of universal brotherhood has given way to the postmodern notion of multiple and fragmented identities. Many of us have chosen to do political work (including both academic and teaching endeavors), but there is no longer a single political leadership to follow nor an indisputable chosen group—as the working class was to my parents and grandparents. The truth, both exciting and difficult, is that, politically and culturally speaking, my generation has flown by the seat of its pants. There were none before us to develop the field of gender and science (for example). But we used tools given to us by the best of the previous generation—combining a dash of daring with vision, a passion for social change, and a critical mindset.

What is true when we compare ourselves with our parents’ generation is equally true when we compare ourselves with our students. We cannot hope that they will be us. Nor can we expect them to understand more than a few fragments of our lives. I look out at the young people in my classes and know that they have not a clue as to who I am now, how I got here, and what I feel about the world. And I, also, have little insight into what they really think, what their eyes see, what makes them tick. With so little overlapping ground, how can I create the mutual empathy that I think is essential for teaching and learning? What can I teach them? I can't possibly fill in all the information they are missing about the past or even about the present. But I can offer them what my parents' generation gave me—a vision of the future. I can't tell them how to get there, but I can give them research skills and urge them to learn how to organize. I can offer them undying intellectual curiosity. Some will accept the offer. That others will not is one of those difficult facts of life for a teacher.

Although I work well with individual students in one-on-one situations, I feel fairly certain that my days as an effective classroom teacher of students in late adolescence are about over. Oedipus and Electra haunt my classroom, and I am not interested in being the resident Mother target. My position as a feminist scientist often alienates me from science students
who can't figure out what to make of me. (For example, I recently had a student drop a course in the history of genetics and embryology because there was too much history in it. Note the title and go figure!) But because I really love science and teach it (even in the history course), women's studies students also avoid me. Like most women's studies programs around the country, Brown's does not require its majors to study science—something I have written about elsewhere.²

Intellectually and pedagogically, I have found myself most at home in a new academic field—science studies.³ Those who gravitate to this new field have had to accept the existence of a feminist analysis of science (as one of several critical approaches to studying science as culture). Furthermore, these colleagues are generally not allergic to the idea that science studies students need straight science courses and technological literacy. So, once again, I find myself advocating at my university for a new course of study—one that elicits a certain degree of puzzlement or hostility from departments unfamiliar with this new body of research and one that is as interdisciplinary as gender studies and as exciting to its subset of students as early women's studies courses were to the young feminists of the 1970s and 1980s.

Although, with age, I have grown less happy in the classroom, my intellectual work now brings me more pleasure than ever. Finally, thirty years into the game, I feel like I understand a little something about how the world works. That it has taken me so long is, perhaps, in the nature of truly interdisciplinary work. One has to become mistress of several fields and also learn how to work profitably at the borders connecting particular disciplines. Part of my alienation from the classroom certainly lies in the fact that I want nothing more, at the moment, than to work—alone or with others—at the level of sophistication it has taken me so long to develop. Teaching at this level is not possible with undergraduates who must first learn the basics. But here too, I have made a choice about teaching. I decided, for example, to write my new book Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Human Sexuality (2000) for a general readership, banishing the more arcane academic and technical discussions to the end-notes. This form of writing utilizes my teaching skills outside of the classroom, where, in the end, I reach a larger and more diverse audience than I can ever hope for through in-person contacts.

² Fausto-Sterling 1992. See also the Web site of the American Association of Colleges and Universities for various projects aimed at overcoming the kinds of difficulties I discuss (http://www.aacu-edu.org/Initiatives/scilit.html).
Our professional strengths and weaknesses change as we age. I sometimes wonder whether teaching is a profession better suited to younger colleagues who by virtue of their youth share more experiences and points of view with their students. And I think it is possible that we really do get wiser with age. If I am right about this double surmise, then it would make sense for the university of the twenty-first century to allow scholars gradually to transform their focus as they age. Such a transformation could take advantage of the certain knowledge that the skills and needs of beginning teachers, scholars, and feminists differ from those who have been at it for thirty years. I often used to joke that my generation of feminists would not take menopause lightly, that there would be an explosion of books on aging, public protests about estrogen, and more. Sure enough, the list of menopause books grows apace. In the same way, I hope that our generation of feminists will struggle out loud with what it means to age within the academy. Perhaps this brief essay will start the discussion.

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References