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Lindy L. Johnson

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Undocumented Students and Classroom Advocacy: Be Not Afraid

Ian Altman

Clarke Central High School, Athens, GA

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“The DREAM Act is probably the only way I can go to college, and I really appreciate that it matters to someone who isn’t directly affected,” read a line in an email from a student, a line that woke me up. I sat there for a moment, letting my thoughts and feelings coalesce into something I could articulate to a sixteen year old girl who had been my student in the fall of 2008 and would be again in the spring of 2011.

The events leading up to that email on a day in early December, 2010 will always be with me. It was late morning, during a class change, and many students were in the hall moving quickly to the next class. The student, Elizabeth, walked by quickly but paused just long enough to say, “Hey, Mr. Altman, would you call Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson and tell them to vote for the DREAM Act?” Another student was there, cell phone in hand, already making the call. “Oh, yes, I will,” I replied. Elizabeth had already disappeared down the hall by the time I realized the full meaning of what had just transpired.

I had known Elizabeth is Mexican since 2008 when I taught Rudolfo Anaya’s novel *Bless Me, Ultima* to her 9th grade literature class. She was able to explain to the class some details of the Mexican folklore in the novel that I had not been aware of. I also knew that she speaks Spanish with her parents, although her English is better than most Americans’. But that was all. I had not attached any significance to those things beyond the bare facts. Why should I? We have students from all over the world at our school, and her documentation status was none of my business.

In asking me that question, though, Elizabeth had revealed that and many more things besides. She had revealed that she is undocumented; she had stated that despite being undocumented, she hoped to go to college; she had demonstrated her political awareness and commitment; and she had proven her willingness to engage, in whatever way she could, in the democratic process. She had also given me the invaluable gift of trust.

That gift caused me to ask myself, as I sat there reading and rereading her email, what do I owe this kid? What should she get in exchange for that gift? I thought about it for a long time, and the nature of my job began to take on new contours, or at least I began to see its contours differently.

The study of language and literature is, broadly speaking, part of what in a less awkward time we celebrated as the humanities. I know of no better statement of the place of literature in the humanities than William Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which he said, "I decline to accept the end of man.... I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.... The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail." My job, at its best, is to help build those pillars.

Accordingly, every semester I tell my students without equivocation or apology that I can teach the Georgia Performance Standards or Common Core Standards all day long, and train them to pass those absurd standardized tests, and lie to them about how meaningful all that is whilst wearing that cultivated but non-ironic master pedagogue face which they accept at face value because either they think we believe in it or they think their success in school is predicated on acting as though they believe in it. But if at the end of the semester they haven't learned something more and deeper about their own humanity, then I might as well have been working in a factory building robots.

That is the crux of the thing. The fact that we educators are working with human beings and not merely trying to produce "student outcomes" and future employees is important. The two issues of advocating for undocumented students and wrestling with the Common Core Standards might seem only distantly related, but they are not. The connection is precisely this: the belief that teaching is not always, already, and inherently advocacy is born out of an impoverished understanding of the politics of curricula. I am not talking about the culture wars in their usual formulation, but about the limits placed on what counts as an acceptable war framework, and about the absorption of our framework into a fundamentally conservative worldview. In that worldview, it might be acceptable to talk about undocumented students and their struggle strictly as an academic issue, but to behave as though that issue matters is unseemly or ethically out of bounds.

Let us begin at the beginning, to render at least the outline of an account. Rosen (1987) argues that "[e]very hermeneutical program is at the same time itself a political manifesto or the corollary of a political manifesto" (p. 147). He goes on to make the case that modern theory, as such, has become interpretation, otherwise known as hermeneutics. *Θεωρία* (*theoria*) has changed from its ancient meaning of contemplation or passive apprehension of divine and natural phenomena into *ποίησις* (*poiesis*), making, poetry in the broadest sense, the active and

discursive construction of ideas, including mathematics and the hard sciences, with which to explain things. The modern axiom that we know only what we make means that the ancient promise of philosophy to replace opinion with knowledge has found its apotheosis in the modern project to replace philosophy with poetry. Furthermore, that axiom “carries with it the corollary that we make what we know. Knowledge then is poetry; to judge is thus to interpret” (Rosen, p. 148). Interpretations, by their nature perspectival, are the shifting sands upon which people make judgments, including judgments about what ought to be taught and learned. Since the mind, too, has become a discursive artifact, learning is at once the writing and reflexive interpretation of poetry, while teaching is a rhetoric of poeticization.

Thus is knowledge completely unmoored from the world: there is no more world, and the modern project of erotic apotheosis, now unmasked as political domination on the one hand and metaphysical impotence on the other, has decayed into the democratic but narcissistic wish to be merely interesting within the confines of someone else’s artifice. “Old father, old artificer,” calls Stephen Daedalus. “Student outcomes” and “teacher output” come the replies from conjurers like Bill Gates and Arne Duncan. No wonder the kids are bored in school. Let us think of it as a numbing effect of our “coarsening in theological ambition” (Rosen, 1989, p. 181).

How, then, do we educators frame our understanding of the perspective from which the poetry of the Common Core was made? The salient feature is that its attempt to present a valueless surface is a rhetorical concealment of a rhetoric of conservatism that hides in plain sight. One of the standards for “informational texts,” for example, says, “Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts.” On the face of it, that standard seems perfectly unremarkable. One reads the text, identifies the arguments, examines them for weaknesses and strengths, and so on. However, it does not ask that the student evaluate him or herself in relation to that text. That connection could very likely cause the student to change an opinion about something, even about her parents.

Consider the case of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail.” It is all well and good to examine the text’s rhetoric, to admire the inventive uses of figurative language and the deep resonances of its many allusions. One might even daringly ask whether King’s argument that some laws ought to be broken is convincing: since we no longer have Jim Crow laws, that should be safe, right? Since almost no one I know believes anymore that Jim Crow laws were just or morally defensible, students can easily agree with King without risking a thought about the 2010 [Citizens United vs Federal Election Commission](#) decision or Georgia’s [House Bill 87](#), which is designed to make life so difficult for undocumented immigrants that they will “self-deport,” to use Mitt Romney’s phrase.

Similarly, the Common Core literary standards, one of which reads “Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development,” require teachers to don the chinstrap of that non-ironic master pedagogue face we are expected to wear. Even a simple example, such as Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, illustrates the conservative absorption of what is an inherently radicalizing experience. Students may appreciate the depiction of friendship, cry at Carlson’s coldness in killing Candy’s dog, and even realize that the cruelty of the life the ranch hands lead is in some way connected to the confluence of nature’s way and the unmitigated capitalist pursuit of power. But that is still at a safe distance. From my urban students’

perspectives, we don't work on ranches anymore; the Lennies of the world are cared for (Aren't they? Don't we now have laws for that?); and in 2013, Curly's wife surely would have a name.

I don't like those poems. Their meanings are anti-meanings and the authors are cowards. Literary learning must involve some disruption and risk of oneself.

I cannot fathom that the most common essay question assigned for high school students on Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is to argue whether George does the right thing in shooting Lennie in the end. The question ignores what I consider to be the more important concern that the tragedy of the book is in George's inevitable loss of his humanity to the indifferent, naturalist world he inhabits, a loss that is dramatized in his monstrous final act of love for Lennie. But to teach the book in that way is at least implicitly to insist that students wonder whether their world, our world, is similarly indifferent, and the danger is that some will conclude that it is. Some then will say so, not only in class, but out in the world, and to the world, and thus a subversive will have been made. This scenario is not mere supposition. I have seen it happen as a result of my teaching, even as I insist that teachers should resist the urge to think of literary themes as moral lessons. I certainly never told them they should reject capitalist society. I merely asked that they look at it closely, and ask themselves how many real Carlsons murder, how many real Lennies suffer, how many real Georges struggle to live humane lives until they die inside, and how a different kind of social and economic order might ameliorate things.

In the case of the "Letter From Birmingham Jail," one does not need to have a radical agenda to point out that King has one, as he himself claims in the letter after some initial misgivings and the pragmatic placement of himself between the White power structure on the one hand and Farrakhan's Nation of Islam on the other. King overtly makes a moral argument for breaking certain laws, for subverting the absolute *rule* of law. The point is that when a law is unjust, it is *good* to be subversive. And since there are still unjust laws, though of course we may factionalize and quibble over which laws are unjust, it is fair to teach that King would say we still ought to be subversives. It makes no difference that he himself is not here to direct our specific moral compasses, though it is hard not to compare the old Jim Crow laws to Georgia's HB 87, which encourages racial profiling among other things. Does saying so cross a line? Of course it does, and that is the point. Why be afraid to say so? The "line" is only there because of a conservative hold on what counts as a properly academic attitude. Conservatives see proper academic deportment as "restraint," and conflate that with a "dignified attitude" or even "maturity," rhetorically but emptily laying claim to some imagined purity of an academic fortress. The claim is dogmatic, and the list goes on.

As Mark Slouka (2009) has pointed out, "Thus we encourage anemic discussions about Atticus Finch and racism but race past the bogeyman of miscegenation; thus we debate the legacy of the founders but tactfully sidestep their issues with Christianity; thus we teach *Walden*, if we teach it at all, as an ode to Nature and ignore its full-frontal assault on the tenets of capitalism" (p. 39). Important problems and issues such as those get boxed up and put out of reach because they involve real risk and real danger.

The box is big enough to include the teaching of writing as well, beginning with the topics teachers typically assign in order to teach students how to make an argument. How many times

have teachers soft-balled our students with topics such as whether they should have school uniforms and how the school should change the lunch menu? Even with an ostensibly risqué current issue such as whether states should allow gay marriage, students are typically asked only to create arguments to support what they already know, or think they know, to engage in what I call “critical thinking” with a prophylactic, risking nothing of themselves. To assign a topic that causes students to question what they know, to make a problem where there was not one before, and to teach them how to engage such a problem – that is the hard and necessary thing. Students will learn immeasurably more from questions such as what exactly society finds objectionable in offensive language and why society objects to it in some situations but not others, whether it is logical to say that there is a duty to be free in our democracy, and what exactly should be the requirements for immigrants to obtain green cards and U.S. citizenship, because those are issues that require real examination of the very notions of morality and justice and the self. Teaching those kinds of things is a kind of activism without advocating any specific view beyond the need to disrupt settled thoughts.

Furthermore, there is a conservative activism in the way the Common Core treats the purpose of writing: “Write arguments to support claims...”; “Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization and analysis of content...”; “Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique....” Again, on the face of it, it is hard to imagine someone objecting to the development of those skills. The trouble is that the demands do not go far enough. There still is no risk involved. One can teach writing according to such standards and never suggest that people can write in order to figure out what their opinions are; that it is not always a good idea to settle on an opinion; that if one has to invent a specious argument to support an opinion, that opinion might not be worth supporting; that writing at its best can be a conversation with one’s own soul and with others; that writers can produce a narrative to figure out just what the story is; that analysis can lead to obscurity and befuddlement; that clear organization can also be inventive and non-conventional. Such considerations will not help anyone get a job at Microsoft or the state Department of Education.

All of that complexity can result from the teaching of writing and canonical texts in a genuinely engaged way rather than from a properly safe, standardized distance that denies students agency, and thus makes it acceptable and even preferable for them not to notice why their experiences and perspectives are important.

Rosen makes the argument in *The Ancients and the Moderns* that the ultimate absurdity of political conservatism, understood as the desire to prevent change, is that it requires the destruction of all children. Even if educators restrict what is taught, and how things are taught, they can never prevent imaginative children from thinking their own thoughts in their own ways, nor can they predict which children will be more imaginative than others. He suggests that the Nietzschean experiments with truth of late modernism and postmodernism are justifiable depending on whether the Enlightenment “could have been suppressed without engendering consequences far worse than those of the failure of the French Revolution” (p. 234). I submit not only that the consequences would indeed be far worse, but also that the echo of attempts to suppress the Enlightenment is evident in ill-considered laws such as Georgia’s HB 87 and Arizona’s SB 1070. To the extent that such laws affect DREAMers, their true intent boils down

to the desire to hurt kids as a means to prevent change. To raise such a question in class, even without the slightest indication of what side of the debate the teacher holds, is necessarily a disruption of the conservative frame-poem of which the rhetoric of the Common Core is emblematic. It says that there are more important things in life.

Elizabeth wrote, “The DREAM Act is probably the only way I can go to college, and I really appreciate that it matters to someone who isn’t directly affected.” Finally, I was able to respond: “Of course it affects me directly. How could I show up to work every day and look you in the face with any integrity, and not support that bill?” That evening, I made a commitment to help Elizabeth get into a good college that would accept her and to help her find a way to pay for it. I have made good on that commitment and have not looked back or had the slightest regret. If that makes me politically controversial, an activist either salutary or pernicious, so be it. It is an essential part of my job.

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