A Reappraisal of Student Resistance

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In last Spring's Review we published "An Essay On Student Resistance" in an attempt to make sense out of classroom experiences we had found disturbing and in an effort to engage faculty and students in a discourse about education. Briefly, the essay characterized student resistance as involving hostile or passive reluctance to learn, to engage in meaningful conversation in the classroom, or to seriously pursue reading and writing assignments. We treated resistance as a negative force we felt compelled to overcome if we were to create a community of learning.1 Our original essay on student resistance described it as socially produced by structural conditions in the university, the social class "clash" of students and faculty, the students' antecedent high school experience, and the counter-resistance of faculty themselves.

The essay we present here examines the discourse which emerged in response to the original paper. Two distinct interpretations of student resistance have unfolded, one produced by faculty, one by students. This emerging discourse has caused us to reconsider our original conclusions.

**Faculty Voice**

Our colleagues' response to the first essay was swift and univocal. We were congratulated for bringing into the public forum a problem without a name. We were applauded for calling on the carpet "student attitudes," which had long needed change. We found ourselves in the interesting position of having been read as blaming students for their resistance to education. That had not been our intent.

We were troubled by the response of our colleagues. Certainly they had not bothered to read beyond the first descriptive paragraphs. Clearly, they had misread our work. Further consideration of the faculty's response to student resistance suggests that our colleagues share in common a stereotype which blames the students for their resistance.

Faculty envision an idealized student who has mastered the basic skills of active reading and writing and has at least some notion of critical, analytical thought. The ideal student has been exposed to the classics and is securely grounded in knowledge of western culture, values and heritage. This is the student we wish to encounter. This is the student, moreover, we believe we deserve.

This entitlement has been reinforced by the decade's critiques of secondary education. Works by Bloom, Hirsch, Finn, as well as the report called *A Nation at Risk*, inform us what the student is not, and should be. The reports are, moreover, vicious
in their attack on the high school. They are matched in their meanness only by the actual responses they provoke — i.e., unrealistic responses of university faculty to the real pupils encountered in the classroom.

In the classroom, faculty respond to a caricature of the actual student, based on negative stereotypes reinforced by the conservative critique of secondary education. Teachers hold this caricature of the "real" student up against the socially constructed, idealized notion of an essential student, and come to the classroom prepared to be frustrated and disappointed by those who face them each semester. The viciousness of faculty in their collective representation of the student is expressed succinctly in the way they describe students to each other outside the classroom: "they're cretins; they're parochial; they're loggerheads; they're lazy."

In fact, we have very little first- or second-hand knowledge of the real nature of the lives our students lead or of the content of their secondary school experience. What we know, we have read in Bloom or Hirsch; what we know most assuredly is that we are being cheated, and that we deserve better. The essential student has come to be regarded by us as a necessary and deserved condition of our labor, something to which we believe we are entitled by virtue of having chosen to be university professors.

This caricature of the student is based on negative stereotypes, and, like all stereotypes, has social-psychological benefits for those who hold them. In this case, the ignorance of the students enhances our own sense of knowledge and intelligence, thus our self esteem. This may be especially significant for those of us who define our personhood by our membership in an intellectual elite, yet who in fact teach at a decidedly non-elite, four year university.

Instead of devising methods that might facilitate the students' entry into our world, we come to the classroom and, by the sophistication of our language, our reference to and choice of reading materials, and by the assumptions we make about the skills students should have mastered, exclude them. More importantly, we publicly humiliate them. For example, the first two reading assignments in the required Freshman Seminar Handbook compiled by our university faculty, are Alan Sanoff's "What Americans Should Know" and Allan Bloom's "The Excitement of Learning," both of which condemn the educational experience our students have just completed, informing the students how inadequately prepared they are for their college experience. In our discussions about these essays, we force students to acknowledge the accuracy of these claims and leave them frustrated by their admissions. The "ceremony of degradation" is underway (Garfinkle).
This caricature of the student is based on negative stereotypes

We recognize the danger inherent in this description of the faculty voice. We have now moved from our original position, in which we were read as "blaming the student" to a new position in which we appear to blame the faculty. On the contrary, the faculty reading of student resistance, like the resistance itself, must be regarded as a social, cultural product (Fox). It is created out of the general "text" of the emerging culture of the 1980's. This text is comprised of the demographic conditions in higher education which have seriously limited faculty mobility (Huber). It is composed also of conservative political ideology, with its exaltation of individual freedom and choice, personal responsibility for social outcomes, and belief in the moral superiority of blaming the victim. Moreover, current popular culture creates heroes out of bat-swinging high school principals, engaged in "cleaning up" and "straightening out" operations while society ignores what we believe to be the real function of secondary and higher education: the reproduction of our system of social inequality (Apple).

Finally, the faculty reading of student resistance is an example of resistance-in-kind. As such, it represents the collective voice of a faculty, frustrated in their attempts to improve the lot of their students and in their efforts to influence their own conditions of labor. It is a response to university administrators committed to irresponsible patterns of growth in numbers of students and new programs, without examining the demoralizing and debilitating effects of such practices on the university.

Faculty and students, then, end up in what appear to be confrontational positions. Both work the system to their "minimum disadvantage," i.e., both groups negotiate implicitly with their opponents to arrive at a minimalist settlement regarding how business is to be conducted in the classroom and the university (Hobsbawn). This ongoing negotiation is based on the faculty's stereotype of the student, and is grounded in, and limited by, our age and experience. In a different context, Sharon Thompson captures the disparate nature of our worlds of discourse in her critique of feminist attempts to understand teenage romanticism in feminists' own terms. She says: "I was a teenager," we think, 'and so I know how it is.'" Though we may have once been where our students now are, we are no longer there, and our own developmental time and place limits our capacity to comprehend their perspective. It limits, moreover, our ability to negotiate a mutually beneficial outcome based on mutual trust.

Student Voice

Our original essay was employed as a teaching device in several classes on our campus, producing a collection of written and verbal responses to the work. Students read our original piece more carefully than the majority of our colleagues. After all, as one student pointed out, the title implicitly holds them to blame for resistance. Their more
careful reading is also explained by their regarding us as "other," and their not expect-
ing to share our reading of the classroom situation. The student interpretation of resis-
tance parallels our original interpretation, yet adds other dimensions to our
comprehension of the situation.

Student discourse tells us that students accurately read the faculty definition of the sit-
uation. That is, they know how they are viewed by us. They quickly learn during their
first semester that we regard their high school preparation as inadequate. And they
universally acknowledge their resistance as a fact of the classroom. However, they
account for it differently than we did in our original essay, and differently from the
"victim-blame" approach adopted by most of our colleagues.

Student accounts of resistance point to a culture which emphasizes "easy-fixes" and
quick solutions. Thus, they tell us that students will "naturally" resist any difficult
or time-consuming task. They point also to our collective cultural obsession with grades,
to the exclusion of learning or content. One student says: “None of the colleges I applied
to wanted to know what I had learned in high school; all they cared about was my
grade point.” Like our own account, the student explanation of resistance considers
the structural impediments of the university, e.g., large class size which, from their
vantage point, restricts the instructor to a pattern of "boring lectures" and which makes
it difficult for faculty to involve students actively in the process of learning.

Missing in their accounts are what we genuinely expected to predominate: complaints
about having to take required courses they see as irrelevant and boring. Students here
seem to have a sincere regard for the necessity of a General Education (contrary to
the national disdain for General Education reported in Alexander Astin’s annual sur-
vey of college freshmen), and only a handful attribute their resistance to university
imposed curricular requirements.

Many of our student respondents corroborate the findings of the national reports
that criticize the quality and content of the secondary school experience. Students
acknowledge their inadequacy, but ground it in the reality of their situation. One stu-
dent expresses the dilemma in this way:

Students resist, the authors say, because they refuse to deal with difficult material
and only want a minimal grade. What the authors need to realize is that maybe
the work done by a student is their best work. Maybe the students have never
been taught how to dig deeper and search their mind.

Another student says:

I read the material we're assigned most of the time. But when I get into the
Missing in their accounts are... complaints about having to take required courses

classroom and the professor starts asking questions, I can't answer them. The questions he asks are not one-word-answer questions. They require concrete evidence to back them up and when I try to answer a question, it's only half of an answer. I don't think anyone in the class has ever been exposed to this kind of answering [emphasis ours: note, the student does not say questioning]. As a result, students just sit there and it gives the illusion that no one has read the text when at least half of the class has.

These students recognize their shortcomings. They recognize, also, our inability or unwillingness to bridge the gap that separates us, and their account of resistance also informs us about our own inadequacies and in ways we had not anticipated.

In our original essay, we attributed student resistance to the disparity between working class culture and the culture of the academic world (see also, Willis). Many students who responded to that essay were offended by the attribution, thinking that we had unfairly singled out one class for blame, ignoring the resistance of upper and middle class students. Some, however, do in fact acknowledge the differences in social class as a contributor to resistance. For example, one student says:

Working-class students tend to believe in things that can be seen and touched and dealt with. It is not that they think intellectuals are naive; it is that they are unaccustomed to the questioning of their beliefs and the ideas they have taken for granted. The student is wary of casting off any of his old ideas, has a difficult time questioning his beliefs, and therefore reacts in class by reacting with little effort or by not reacting at all.

Moreover, students who take social class into account remind us of the real exigencies of their daily lives and routines:

As a working-class student, I can honestly say that I view much of what is taught to us as not valuable and a waste of time. I have two jobs, am active in school, and have a full academic load. I would love to have time to sit around in the library, reading up on Plato and/or madness in the nineteenth century, but I must go out in the cold world and earn a buck. Money makes the world go 'round, sad but true. I am paying to go to college, and I am forced to take classes which I detest and that have nothing to do with my major. Day after day I watch the bills pile up, while I desperately try to finish the book about Dante's travels through Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell [The Divine Comedy].

I am not obsessed with "facts" or reductionism. I want to learn, and argue and debate. However, I feel sometimes beaten by the system, unable to fulfill all the
allotted tasks. It's ironic — we work to stay in college, yet we are accused of resistance because we are of the working class. I am independent, and I will continue to be. Sorry if I can't be a snotty little bitch who calls mom for some cash every week. Then again, I think I saw one of those girls resisting in class the other day.

Students are much less willing to blame teachers for their resistance than teachers are to blame them. And, they are poigniant in their suggestion that resistance represents the students' attempt to negotiate a system about which they know very little, and which serves to undermine their sense of person and place. The language of the classroom includes the spoken language of the faculty and the silent language of our representation of students. Both languages exclude the student, who, in turn, stands mute before us (Ardener). Students perceive much more acutely than we do the linguistic and symbolic difference between us and them and the limitations it imposes on their education. The following example illustrates this point.

During our semester of data-gathering and conversation with colleagues and students about resistance, our campus hosted a visit of Ivan Illich. Our freshman students were required to attend and respond to Illich's lectures. In person and in writing, Illich epitomizes the academic world: he is the academic's academic, the intellectual's intellectual. Our students' responses to Illich validate the observations we have made in this paper about the disparate worlds of discourse we inhabit. One student said of Illich: "The whole damned thing was about books, books, books. And that's not all there is, believe me." Another student said she felt humiliated (not humbled) in the presence of Illich, like a child who had wandered into a place where she clearly did not belong and where she was definitely not welcome.

We believe these responses characterize the initial encounters our students have with the world of higher education, and their resistance should be reconsidered in this light. As such, it appears as a positive exercise in self and cultural preservation. It represents, in other words, an effort and response on the part of students to negotiate a settlement and a solution to the attacks on self, history, culture, and social class that entry into the arena of higher education represents for them (Scott).

What are the implications of this for our teaching? Following Freire, Habermas, and Misgeld, we define education as social intervention and regard learning as "a step toward the achievement of mutual recognition of their capacities (competence) by and for teachers and learners." Moreover, education as intervention requires that "teachers and learners confirm one another in their identity as inquiring selves in the very process that they are jointly committed to: an acknowledgment of one another as equally significant participants" (Misgeld).

As sociologist Jean Ardener (1982) comments on cultural literacy, we argue that cultural literacy educates students about their social class position. That construction of identity is a resistance that construing the classroom as a place in which to unmask. Our students' assertions that eroded the symbolic and linguistic distance between an agent liberating the students from their working class position and the teacher as liberator, suggests that a traditional nature is both constructed in and regulated by the student and faculty interaction.

We offer not only resistance from the student's perspective, but also from the teacher's perspective. As authors, we attempt to understand and respond to the dialectic with educators and teachers about the implications of interpreting the text of the sociologist as "read against the grain," as "reading the author, not the writer" (Scott). We have attempted to take the position of the student as a way of understanding the classroom as a negotiated space.

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We have fully acknowledged the contributions of the position class and the third world.


S. Ardener. Language and the Power of Mind. N.Y.
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As sociologists, we see our specific educational task as the promotion of cultural literacy in our students. We think this especially important at Grand Valley, which educates students who typically are not in privileged social positions. Promoting cultural literacy means that we make our students aware of the underlying assumptions that construct their lives, and provide them with the ability to question, debunk, and unmask. Our task, then, is this: to engage our students in discourse about the conditions that erode their ability to be free. Our goal is to create, in them and in ourselves, an agent liberated from the past, immediate, and future constraints of culture and class position. Our teaching must emphasize reflection; it must redirect the oppositional nature of our confrontations with one another; and it must recognize student and faculty resistance as potentially positive forces of social change.

We offer no recipe for more effective teaching, only this analogy. We suggest that the teacher be regarded as the principal author of a text, which is the classroom dynamic. As authors, we “arrange” the statements and experiences of our students in an effort to understand them and in an attempt to make sense out of our mutual encounter with education and with one another. Our mandate is to recognize that the reader’s interpretation of the text might, in fact, differ from our own. We must, then, learn to “read against the grain of the text’s dominant voice, seeking out other, half-hidden authorities, reinterpreting the descriptions, text, and quotations gathered together by the writer” (Clifford). We must recognize the polyphonic voice of the text and be prepared to take it into account as we negotiate a trusting and mutually beneficial educational settlement with our students.

Notes

1For a discussion of the history of “normal” resistance, see James Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance, Chapter two, especially.
2We have approximately 50 written student responses to the original essay. We gratefully acknowledge the participation of students in Anthony Parise’s English Composition class and of our own Freshmen Seminar students.

Works Cited


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