



Knowledge, Learning, and Teaching Striving for Conocimiento

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Abstract: Anzaldúa inspires my courage to write and speak plainly, and together with encouragement from several good colleagues, I offer personal testimony, as part of a critical reflection on my own long teaching practice, my earlier writing and speaking about education, and an even longer history as a learner. Love is at the heart of it, a concern for students' well being, intellectual and spiritual. As bell hooks has noted, an "engaged pedagogy" involves the teacher in "sharing in the intellectual and spiritual growth" (hooks 1994: 13) of students, not only for the student's sake, but also for the professor's. Of course, only in this sense, in Anzaldúa's terms, can we as professors too begin to define ourselves in terms of who we are becoming, not who we have been, reaching that final step toward *conocimiento*, where we gain clarity about our own "vision or spiritual activism" (Anzaldúa 2002: 568) and fix on an ethical, compassionate strategy toward our life's work. After all, this furthers our central "human task." Gloria describes that task this way: "to determine what your life means, to catch a glimpse of the cosmic order and your part in that *cosmovision*" (Anzaldúa 2002: 540).

Gloria Anzaldúa's last published work, "now let us shift...the path to *conocimiento*...inner work, public acts," lists *teaching* as one of those creative endeavors through which we can seek *conocimiento*, and the holistic intellectual, spiritual and political unity of purpose and direction that it can bring to a life (Anzaldúa 2002: 542). Anzaldúa inspires my courage to write and speak plainly, and together with encouragement from several good colleagues,¹ today I offer personal testi-

mony, as part of a critical reflection on my own long teaching practice, my earlier writing and speaking about education, and an even longer history as a learner. In Anzaldúa's terms, this is my own *Koyol xauh qui*,² a newly reformulated story of myself and my attempts at transformation.

KNOWLEDGE

It is easy to see why I internalized the notion that knowledge, and the path to wis-

¹ Shirley Tang, Ann Torke, Karen Suyemoto, and Christina Bobel, with whom it has been a privilege to work as colleagues and who never cease to inspire me.

² This term and all other references to Gloria Anzaldúa's ideas, of course, are taken from Anzaldúa 2002.

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dom, was in mastery of external bodies of knowledge that were created and constituted by others, as the “material,” the “subject matter” of study. That material altogether was huge, awe-inspiring, intimidating, and fairly inaccessible. It was necessary to use the power of my intellect, and hard reason, helped by memory, to master or dominate this knowledge, that had little to do with me or anything I knew.

It was no wonder that people in my world usually did not succeed at that, and that going to school did not help much either, since teaching usually concentrated on what Paulo Freire (1970) has called the “banking method,” or bell hooks has called, the transmission of “compartmentalized bits of knowledge” (hooks 1994: 15). The more that knowledge became the focus of attention, ironically, the farther away and more overwhelming it became. The only way you could make headway was to study it for a *very long* time, and aided by memorization, slowly master that terrain—unless you had something better to do, like making a living.

I was a working-class child of a rural North American culture, Appalachian, born of parents and grandparents who were never given as much formal education as they wanted, and who were pained by what had been denied them. Their hands and their backs hurt from work, but their heads burst constantly from curiosity. In the expanding U.S. economy of the 1950s, I carried their hopes, and promised some vindication for them. I never made the mistake of equating schooling with wisdom,³ but I also never considered myself entitled to formal education and never took it for granted. I always felt, and continued feeling so even after my Ph. D. and becoming a junior professor, that I would need a fairly substantial makeover to fashion myself into type of person I had always understood educated, sophisticated people to be—to be able to speak “that way,” especially.

LEARNING

I was never sure I could do it, and was surprised I had the chance. The first to be in college, and an elite one yet, with scholarships, accepted through what was then an early kind of affirmative action for deserving working-class white people of rural and small town America. I was chosen to add regional and class diversity to the mostly white East coast, bourgeois student body at my college—which had less than 3% students of color in today’s terms.

Now I understand that many people were kind and supportive in extending these privileges to me, of course, in trying to teach me, and in believing that I could learn. They even gave me awards occasionally. At the time, I mostly felt scared, confused, and overwhelmed. I experienced identity conflict and confusion. I didn’t know where I belonged. Whenever I was home, I never wanted to go back; when I was at school, I never wanted to go home. Of course, I was embarrassed at my family’s deficit of education. I thought I had to work even harder to make up for it, to prove myself. Not one professor or staff member ever perceived that I might be thinking about any of these things, and *not once* was I ever asked to reflect or write on them as part of my studies. I certainly lived through what Anzaldúa calls rupture, *El arrebato*, and

³ In fact, we suspected those who were too schooled were not the most intelligent people, and certainly not those with the most common sense. I later found out that many distinguished writers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Donaldo Macedo have questioned the hyperspecialization of intellect that is fostered by schools, in fact, leading even to what Macedo has called schooling’s increased narrowing of intelligence, or “stupidification” (1994), of the learner. As a child, in fact, I never connected higher learning with intelligence, wisdom, or respect. When I was a youth about 15, a nameless man once told me in barber shop conversation, after asking me about my ambitions in school, “Well, maybe some day you can even be a college professor!” I was completely shocked and dumbfounded that anyone would try to link me with that kind of destiny. I also remember it was the first time in my life to that point when I ever heard anyone speak of college professors with respect.

being torn between ways, or *Nepantla*.⁴

I needed lots of help, to feel welcome and encouraged to speak. I was usually quiet in class, not sure I belonged. In most classes I didn't say one word all semester. Partly it was an issue of learning the conventions. I didn't already have what we now call the cultural capital that made these easy and transparent. I did a lot of hiding. Writing at least was a quiet way of finding and expressing myself, of registering my presence less publicly.

It wasn't tutoring I needed. I always had the sense that learning was a social practice—it wasn't just a matter of intelligence, or willingness to work hard.⁵ It was whether going through all of that was worth it, beyond the matter of curiosity and its satisfaction. Fortunately I was kept alive by the teachers who tried to understand and simply accept me as a person, apart from academic performance, who showed some trust in my abilities and that I was an acceptable person for their friendliness and compassion, or personal recognition and interaction—just a smile and personal word. It sounds strange, but I think even today it is very possible for professors to overlook the need to convey this reassurance—especially when the only site for interaction is the classroom.

These helpful teachers were the ones who usually tried to acknowledge the moral, the political, the affective implications of learning. What does this knowledge—that we are all working on together—have to do with making the world better, seeing and correcting wrongs and injustices, understanding people, promoting love, lessening the world's suffering, enjoying beauty and wonder, expanding one's sense of place in the world, connecting with one's own history, heritage, and ancestors, and making wise

⁴ I have discussed some of these conflicts, and the role they have played in my academic career, including pedagogical development, in Sieber 2001.

⁵ I also knew that working class people like my family members worked very hard, and that economic reward and social status do not always go to those who work the hardest in life.

judgments about how to live? A few teachers—not the best lecturers—fostered the sense that those of us in their class were all partners in joy and wonder in considering such important understandings together. We were doing more than just working through the material.

Discovering Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when I was in graduate school was also a revelation. Seeing teaching and learning as dialogue, and stressing that learning begins with the consciousness of the learner, let me understand that humans have the right to demand teaching acknowledge them, and that learning begin with what they know. And that they have the right to expect that what they learn will be important and meaningful in improving their world and their lives. I didn't know I had those rights! In my education, even in an elite college setting, I didn't know I deserved any of this—which after all gives a basis for critical interrogation of knowledge and wisdom, and for rejecting unacceptable or faulty ideas, unless perhaps you already feel entitled by birth to do that. So, after all, it wasn't just the fault of my own laziness and stupidity that I felt such disinterest in so much of what school insisted that I learn!

TEACHING

Later as a teacher, I drew on all these realizations, frustrations and experiences to understand and approach my own classes. Seeing dialogue and inclusion as goals makes teaching and the classroom, especially, unpredictable, unruly, but hopefully more forgiving and more human. It surely is that older notion of knowledge as disembodied from people, society, and history, as a huge external body of facts, that also deceives us into thinking sometimes that the classroom is a private preserve, a refuge, where professors can close the door and be alone with their students, carrying in their own chunk of the great store of knowledge.⁶

In fact, as Anzaldúa's work so clearly suggests, the classroom is a very public place,

a complex borderland tied directly, despite the silence about naming the connections, with all the worlds everyone inhabits outside. Because it's public, anyone can be there. All these other universes give the classroom its ferment, its unpredictability, its stress and even volatility—but also offer ground for risk taking, exchange, and growth. It's also a place to learn how we can all co-exist amidst differences, keep our separate identities but participate, and collaborate, at the same time. All of these complex learnings, and the ability of people to feel included and to know one another, are only enhanced if the classroom is *not just* a lecture hall, but is accompanied by *some combination* of group work, lots of speaking and listening in all directions, field trips, interaction with people on the outside through action projects, internships, field studies, workshops, or service. All this helps the classroom be a place where everyone can acknowledge the other and feel included, even while it is recognized they live in other, sometimes very different worlds, truly foreign lands, different subjectivities.

What have I learned from my own experience? My teaching is obviously an attempt to correct the inadequacies and difficulties I experienced, to avoid foisting these on my students, to try if possible to make it easier for them. Most teachers never really only copy the models of their teachers, but try to correct them as well. Teachers, when we think about it, are and always must be among the most serious critics of education.

What else? Giving people the chance to take risks, make mistakes, and fall down—without penalizing them for it. Helping them up with a smile. Also, demystifying expression by allowing writing, speaking and con-

⁶ Often I am mortified and ashamed to see the petty tyrannies and disrespectful, dictatorial behavior that some faculty colleagues show to students—sometimes to my own students—in their classrooms, assuming they have superior intelligence, advanced training, and status that justifies this abuse of their power. As a better model, I often think of Boston-area activist Melvin King's definition of power as requiring generosity of spirit: "Power means bringing people to where you are and feeling good about it."

versing to be the *normal* part of life inside the classroom that they are, *after all, outside*. Not grading everything—in fact, valuing but not grading most things that are important—compassion, kindness, a positive spirit, generosity, curiosity, sharing of information. Showing that you like the students, being friendly and welcoming to them.

Love is at the heart of it, a concern for students' well being, intellectual and spiritual. As bell hooks has noted, an "engaged pedagogy" involves the teacher in "sharing in the intellectual and spiritual growth" (hooks 1994: 13) of students, not only for the student's sake, but also for the professor's. Of course, only in this sense, in Anzaldúa's terms, can we as professors too begin to define ourselves in terms of who we are becoming, not who we have been, reaching that final step toward *conocimiento*, where we gain clarity about our own "vision or spiritual activism" (Anzaldúa 2002: 568) and fix on an ethical, compassionate strategy toward our life's work. After all, this furthers our central "human task." Gloria describes that task this way: "to determine what your life means, to catch a glimpse of the cosmic order and your part in that *cosmovision*" (Anzaldúa 2002: 540).

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