

Cornell School of Criticism and Theory – a graduate seminar

Goals

Guinier chose to teach a graduate seminar as a way to explore these issues in a different venue.

Cornell School of Criticism and Theory

About four years ago I became so disillusioned I thought perhaps I needed to find a new job. I wanted to be part of an environment in which students feel an intellectual excitement about learning. I wanted to teach students who were committed to social justice, not just social advancement. I decided to try teaching graduate students. I had hoped that graduate students would be intellectually engaged with a seriousness of purpose that I found missing from some of my law students. I had hoped that graduate students interested in critical theory would be steeped in techniques of analysis that could breathe fresh air into our discussions. I had hoped to find enthusiasm for applying theory to practice among graduate students who were interested in issues of race, gender and social change.

Instead I found many of the graduate students trapped in the learning curve of their disciplines. Unlike law students they were not searching for “the right answer.” But they were eager to show off *their* newly acquired methodological skills, performing their intellects as rising stars trained in the art of mental gymnastics. Some were quite dexterous performers and yet they presented themselves as cautious thinkers. They depended upon their written text as a crucial safety net. The text was beautifully crafted and tightly argued, in the distinctive and obscure vocabulary of their elite academic cohort. As an imposingly interwoven arrangement of ideas, the text was designed not so much to communicate as to impress.

Despite such skillful deployment of the written word, the students were often tongue-tied. Without having first written out their thoughts on a piece of paper, they could not speak. And the need to hold the text directly in front of their face – as if it were a shield or a mask – literally obscured their ability to make eye contact with everyone else in the room. Their intellectual engagement was real, but it seemed to serve the same role as “the right answer” did for law students. It was a competition for recognition, this time in a world of contested abstractions. They were struggling for recognition of their intelligence as manifest in their manipulation of words. They were indeed learned but not necessarily capable of using that learning to address, much less solve, real world problems. I missed my law students, even as I remembered how much they schemed to show off, put down or simply dominate the discussion. At least some of the law students were seeking to become influential in the world around them. However inelegantly they behaved, my law students had a vision

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of a world beyond the academic universe in which they were presently submerged.

That the graduate students, over the course of a six week seminar, were able to move from paralyzing intellectual caution to form a vibrant multiracial learning community is a testament to the power of the methodology.

Lani Guinier

She used an experimental format with an initially skeptical group of 15 graduate students who came to Cornell University for a critical perspectives summer seminar at the School of Criticism and Theory. The students came from disciplines of literary theory, sociology, political theory and theater. Initially students, caught up in the jargon of their discipline, had trouble communicating. Guinier used a format that required eye-to-eye contact and interactive conversation. This enabled experimentation and intellectual exchange across disciplines. Rather than compete or perform, students began to build on each other's ideas. Students rotated responsibility for developing background reading assignments, for planning the lesson and facilitating discussion among the students. The use of experimental formats also made teaching intellectually serious graduate students exciting, even fun.

Active Learning: Theater As Pedagogy

One of the graduate students, Tim Mitchell, introduced Guinier and the class to the techniques of Brazilian director Augusto Boal: image theater and forum theater.

Image Theater: Participants present images of ideas in silence to the rest of the class.

The use of nonverbal images brings in a visual element that can

- disrupt or highlight existing assumptions and hierarchies and
- help participants communicate across disciplinary and other barriers.

Teachers and students play interchangeable roles: each is a “physical form” that can be molded by the artist-participant, and each is capable of becoming the artist-participant and molding the other bodies.

Image Theater has great value in many different settings because it:

- introduces an alternate form of communication where language is hardened, overused or even dangerous
- gives participants a new way to control their “own meaning”
- respects the varying “literacy” levels and cultural experiences of all participants
- helps to subvert traditional group dynamics so that no one person dominates the conversation

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Forum Theater creates scenes of specific challenges or conflict that an actor or group of actors must overcome. The audience first views a scene of a protagonist failing to overcome the challenge. The moderator, called a “joker” invites audience members to participate in solving the conflict by standing up and putting themselves in the scene. Once the audience member intervenes, the joker leads a discussion of the proposed solution and asks for more solutions.

“The subject was the relationship between race, gender and power. It was a big room with black walls and no windows. He told us to dress in comfortable clothes. He then played warm-up games to relax us. He had us gradually create physical images of the word power...”

Theater As Pedagogy

In order to share the power of facilitation in a seminar on Race, Gender and Nation under the Law, I invited students to collaborate in planning and conducting classes. On the day it was his turn to facilitate, Tim Mitchell, a Ph.D. candidate in Theater, asked us to meet him in Cornell's black box theater. The wide-open, flexible space and the invitation to wear loose, comfortable clothing and shoes, for movement, was an immediate change from the seminar room at the School for Criticism and Theory. Tim demonstrated the work of Brazilian theater director and activist Augusto Boal, whose techniques Tim had adapted for use during years working in prisons with prisoners. Three of the exercises stand out as examples of how theater can be a powerful alternative mode for teaching, thinking and communicating.

The "Great Game of Power": We were told to take 5 pieces of furniture in the room, such as four chairs and a table. We then had to arrange the chairs and the table to create a tableau in which one piece of furniture was more powerful than the others. Then, placing ourselves in the scene one by one, we had to take the most powerful position open to us and freeze in that spot. In "The Image of the Word," we used the physical form of student volunteers to create word pictures of power as domination and then contrasted those sculptures with power as a generative force. In "The Machine of Rhythms" Tim ended the session by asking everyone to make a sound and a motion that would normally be associated with a piece of mechanical equipment. Here the sound and motion was intended to reflect students' impressions of the machine of their environment, the School of Criticism and Theory.

These image theater exercises etched in concrete ways the cultural and emotional meaning of power, which was an important theme throughout the seminar. For example, when graduate students were invited to enter the tableau they had created with just the furniture in the Great Game of Power, they each were instructed to assume the most powerful position then available. No one was permitted to speak. As the exercise progressed in complete silence,

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and more students entered the scene, they began to move farther and farther outside the tableau in stop action. They photographed it, recorded it, played charades to signal they were eavesdropping on it, presenting it, writing about it. The sounds and motions at the end produced an explosion of emotion about the ways everyone felt judged in one-dimensional ways by their environment. The images of the word power sculpted by these non-verbal human bodies inform the way I think about narrative power to this day.

I was so inspired by the amazing energy in the room as well as the enduring quality of the creative images of the class at Cornell that I invited Tim to use these theater techniques in a law school seminar. Again the image theater was a memorable device to represent the culture of the community. Whereas the graduate students sought power in their ability to step outside the events at issue in order to narrate a story, the law students sought power by dominating the events in real time. When it was their turn to enter the scene in silence, they presented images of power as a vertical force. One by one they stood atop the highest piece of furniture still available. When that option was gone, the next student to enter the scene cupped his hand to his mouth and stood next to the highest standing student. His gesture signaled power as influence; he was exercising power by whispering in the ear of the student perched on high. Unless they pulled the chairs out from under their classmates, the range of choices was narrowing quickly. Not to be deterred, a student diverted power by pulling out a dollar bill. He then presented the bill to the highest-ranking student, signaling his effort to obtain power corruptly. The student who entered next displayed his platinum credit card to trump the original monetary bribe. Money was the coin of the realm, not story telling. In a variation of the original exercise, students were asked to enter the scene to enhance the power of those already there. This proved to be a very challenging assignment for law students, but one that framed much subsequent discussion about the role of lawyers as negotiators or problem-solvers. By redefining power using an intense and participatory format, the exercises helped activate intellectual, emotional and interpersonal connections.

Since this session Tim has continued to adapt Boal's techniques. For example, he has added two stages to the Great Game of Power. Now participants reenter the scene again to try to take the least powerful position open to them and then again to take the most powerful position open that does not take away power from anyone else. These further steps enrich the experience of inhabiting power positions and often reveal unintended consequences and find metaphors for alternative expressions of power.

Lani Guinier

For more information about these techniques, see Tim Mitchell, Notes from the Inside, Forum Theater in Maximum Security, Theater 31:3, at55 [Fall 2001]

Bryonn Bain, a former student, has used many of the same power sharing techniques to teach a spoken word poetry class at NYU. Bain uses small groups, concrete exercises requiring group problem solving and theatre techniques to create learning communities in which conflict and collaboration are used to fuel creative expression and foster activism.

Theory And Practice Of Workplace Equity

Introduction

This two-semester seminar, which meets as a class for three hours each week, examines cutting edge developments in workplace equity from a variety of disciplinary and professional perspectives. Sturm developed the seminar as an attempt to link her research interests in workplace equity with her teaching interests in developing change-oriented multi-racial learning communities. She created a teaching/research collaboration that could involve students, interdisciplinary faculty, and outside practitioners.

"This is the first class that has challenged the way that I think about many things. Usually, classes are one-dimensional in that they challenge the way that you think about that particular subject. However, this class makes me think about so many things in a different way and figure out if my previous mindset was due to cultural socialization or my own personal experiences."

Goals

This seminar strives to:

- develop a multi-racial intellectual community for public policy oriented students and those who question conventional legal roles.
- enable critical analysis of conventional legal approaches through multidisciplinary studies.
- encourage collaboration and experimentation with innovative strategies to pursue workplace equity.
- generate knowledge and develop professional accountability through reflective practice.

Getting Started

Sturm received a pilot grant to study innovative workplace practice. She also developed a research relationship with the Center for Gender in Organizations. The Columbia Law School Dean was quite supportive of Sturm's efforts to integrate teaching and field research. Sturm was given adequate course credit (3 credits per semester), to develop and conduct the seminar. She developed preliminary research relationships with practitioners in New York and with potential research sites around the country. Many of the students have substantial pre-law school experience as union organizers, human resource

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professionals, sexual harassment trainers and EEOC investigators. A student from prior years serves as a teaching fellow.

Classroom Methods

Students sign up for and facilitate two class sessions, work closely with the professor in developing lesson plans and facilitation strategies, and write regular reflection pieces. Students also meet outside of class with the professor to plan class facilitation and to develop field research projects.

The seminar involves innovative practitioners in this collaborative effort. These outsiders include plaintiffs' counsel, in-house lawyers, organizers, ombuds officers, human resource professionals, and managers. They participate in the facilitation planning and in sessions that are quite interactive. These interchanges generate ideas for field research, expose students to the concerns of practitioners and foster the development of a practitioner network. These sessions provide an opportunity for students and practitioners to identify the assumptions underlying their current practice, using self-reflective inquiry to develop new frameworks. Students also learn interviewing and focus group research skills.

"I think that the power-sharing which has occurred throughout the seminar not only encouraged students to take responsibility for the success of the seminar, but also brought increased power to the instructor (an articulated goal of power-sharing). The respect for the instructor is heightened because of her willingness to treat students as peers and her expectations of our leadership in the classroom."

Active Learning: Field Research

During the first semester, faculty assists students in identifying sites for field research. Students are strongly encouraged to collaborate with each other on these projects. The field research projects provide a strong motivation for students to integrate their academic study with their research focus and method. They also provide concrete opportunities for learning to collaborate, both with other law students and with people in other disciplines and professional settings. The criteria for field research sites are:

- exploring the structural dimensions of a workplace equity issue
- investigating a transformative change initiative
- studying professionals who are role innovators

Faculty Role in Supervising Field Research

The process of developing and carrying out qualitative field research requires considerable faculty support. Sturm meets with students first individually and then in their research groups several times over the course of the first semester to help them select a field research project, frame a research

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question, and begin to develop the research methods they will use to carry out their field research. Researchers from other disciplines provide training in interviewing and observation. Students also learn about the requirements to obtain approval for Human Subjects Research, receive training and certification, and submit applications for Human Subjects Approval.

When It Works

Students rethink familiar assumptions about law, gaining insight into their own capacity to be role innovators. Students become better able to lead, to take intellectual risks, and to collaborate with colleagues. Several students continue their field research under the faculty member's supervision, even after the seminar ends.

"I also tried to engage with my classmates outside of classroom discussions. At first, it was simply an effort to get to know them better. Then, after we began our discussions on political race, it evolved into an explicit effort to build bridges across racial, gender and class lines as part of an overall project to effect social change. "