

Seeking Openings of Already Closed Student-Teacher Relationships

Frank Margonis
University of Utah

Upon beginning his tenure as a high school teacher in an all-boys Catholic school, Eduardo Lopez reports that “during the first weeks, I came across such powerful resistance that I was unsure and confused as to how to teach.” Students in my class “informed me that teachers had been unable to control them and it would be only a matter of time before I, too would leave the school.” Lopez countered the students’ challenge with efforts to establish classroom order, and the students — in turn — dismissed Lopez as a “police officer” en route to organizing successful disruptions of the class. The clash of discipline and resistance peaked one day, and Lopez traces the alteration of his pedagogy to this moment. Even though many students were talking in class, he singled out one who had been continuously disruptive and told the student to leave. Students protested, but Lopez was resolute. The student picked up his bag and began to leave at which point Lopez ordered him to put down his bag. The student refused, and a tussle between student and teacher ensued. Upon seeing himself performing in ways that profoundly violated his own principles, Lopez abandoned the struggle, now seeing himself in just the ways the students had described him. After days of soul searching, Lopez apologized to the students for his heavy-handed tactics and told them he cared too much about them to continue treating them punitively. He told them he would never kick a student out of class again. He switched his pedagogy to focus on stereotypes, racism, and economic inequality and asked students to write weekly papers on topics of their choosing. The students stopped opposing everything Lopez did and began writing essays on Latina/o and African-American leaders who had worked as agents to counteract oppression.¹ This is an extreme example where relationships between the student and teacher were closed off to begin with, but were opened — partly — by the pedagogical strategy of the teacher.

Usually, the signs of closed relationships are far more subtle than the articulate declaration offered by Lopez’s students. Whether the clues of closed relationships come in the form of students who withdraw or act out, it’s clear that a good many students give up on school and turn off to their teachers for a range of economic, racial, and social reasons.² If we can better understand the social, political, and existential dynamics of relational closures, as well as some of the strategies that have enabled teachers to work toward open relationships with their students, we will better understand what is needed to aid the most educationally endangered people in our society. Lopez’s successful response to his students offers us the opportunity to add to the anthropological and pedagogical questions concerning the dynamics of relational openings and closures a profoundly ethical question, “what does it mean for teachers to show respect across the divides of race and class, when the teacher is already positioned as a custodian of an unjust status quo?”

Stated as such, the question arises out of complex and very real social situations, countering the tendency of some ethical discourse to abstract away from the very problems that vex us most. We will seek answers to this question by relying upon two strands of philosophical thought that converge in seeking open, respectful relationships with students while diverging in their priorities. The pathbreaking work of Paulo Freire is devoted first to education for social change, and the Levinasian pedagogy of Sharon Todd prioritizes “nonviolent” relationships with students over any agenda the teacher may bring to the classroom. What for Freire is basic to seeking justice may, in Todd’s view, be itself a form of pedagogical violence. This paper is devoted to understanding the complex interplay between the political agenda critical educators may bring to the classroom and the intersubjective negotiations that are basic to respectful pedagogical relationships. Freire helps us understand that the ethical possibilities of a situation are partly constituted by the social, political, and economic context, as well as by the intersubjective patterns in a particular classroom. Todd and Levinas offer a universalistic standard that calls us to never reduce our interlocutors to our knowledge of them. Eduardo Lopez’s reconciliation of political commitment with openness to his students will not satisfy the ethical standards of either Freire or Todd, but it allows us to ponder the intersection of these discourses as Lopez opened previously closed relationships with his students.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY’S POLITICAL CONCEPTION OF STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Progressive educational philosophy in the United States has shied away from the questions that Lopez could not help but face. In one way or another, most educational philosophy in the United States has been focally concerned with the student’s relationship with knowledge, while a concern with student-teacher and student-student relationships remained in the background. For John Dewey, the greatest concern was focused on the phenomenon that Mike Rose called, “the mental equivalent of playing with your food.”³ Consider the following passage, which offers an intriguing explanation of the student’s divided attention, while illustrating the ways in which student-teacher relationships have not received focal attention in philosophy. The student, Dewey says in *Democracy and Education*,

tries to serve two masters at once. Social instincts, the strong desire to please others and get their approval, social training, the general sense of duty and of authority, apprehension of penalty, all lead to a half-hearted effort to conform, to “pay attention to the lesson,” or whatever the requirement is. Amiable individuals want to do what they are expected to do. Consciously the pupil thinks he is doing this. But his own desires are not abolished. Only their evident exhibition is suppressed.... A systematized divided attention expressing the duplicity of the state of desire is the result.⁴

While this passage reminds us of Dewey’s trenchant critiques of teacher-centered classrooms, it also illustrates Dewey’s disinterest in the relational prerequisites of powerful learning and teaching, for the possibilities for powerful student-teacher relationships are merely assumed in the above passage. The student-teacher relationship Dewey invokes is congenial, but not educationally profound. Dewey’s assumption that students feel an obligation to the teacher preempted any need to

theorize the sort of oppositional stance taken by the students in Lopez's classroom or the steps teachers might take to transform antagonistic relationships into educationally productive ones.

In Lilia Bartolome's perspective, Dewey's focus upon the student's relation to the curriculum, as well as his assumption that the teacher's authority will be accepted, lead to significant blindspots in contemporary educational discussions. She argues that despite the prevalence of cross-race and cross-class tensions in public school classrooms, and despite the importance of such tensions in understanding educational inequalities in U.S. schools, "little minority education literature deals explicitly with the very real issue of antagonistic race relations between subordinated students and White school personnel."⁵

Bartolome argues that critical pedagogies, emerging from the work of Paulo Freire, have the distinct advantage of conceptualizing the political aspects of student-teacher relationships, and Freire does indeed offer us a much better way to think about opening closed relationships than does Dewey. Thinking in a Freirean manner, let us first attempt to explain why the relationships between Lopez and his students were already closed when he met them. In Freire's theory, the tension between Lopez and his students would be traced to their respective class and race locations in the society. Lopez, as a representative of middle-class propriety, was first disposed to create order and establish traditional authority relations between oppressed students and himself. When the students greeted him with threats, he probably received it as a challenge and thus approached the students even more sternly than he otherwise would have. For their part, the students in Lopez's class may well have been resentful of their likely fate in an economically and racially stratified marketplace, as well as with the school's complicity in preparing them to accept that fate.⁶ Lopez (as well as his predecessors), we might guess, was hated because he was the face that stood for the school's complicity — especially when his disciplinary style confirmed the students' worst expectations. Moreover, these contemporary social tensions are informed by a profound historical legacy that continues to live with us and dog our everyday exchanges: the sense of moral indignation felt by African-American and Latina/o students is rooted in unreconciled histories of slavery, segregation, the seizing of Mexican land, and discrimination. Lopez's students have probably been taught by their parents and community members to expect these legacies to continue, and the students appear to have thought the tradition was being extended in Lopez's classroom.

Freire's pedagogy was partly designed to bridge the sort of relational chasms Lopez faced, for it was born in polarized neo-colonial contexts, where Freire and his teachers hailed from the dominant group and needed to establish trust with students who had suffered abusive working conditions as well as the dehumanization integral to colonial domination. To make up for the relational distance between teachers and their students, Freire proposes that teachers should commit "class suicide": they must cleanse themselves of the class- and race-based tendencies to take possession of knowledge and others, and commit themselves to standing in solidarity with their students in their educational and political struggles. They must trust their students,

love them, have faith in them, and they must soak themselves in their students' culture and worldviews.⁷ The curriculum should emerge from the problems faced by the students — problems which reflect the economic and political contradictions of the larger society. The discussions of these problems must place students and teachers on an even playing field so that students learn to dialogue as equal partners in the process of understanding.⁸

Lopez's successful attempt to open his pedagogical relationships with the rebellious students in his class enacted part of this Freirean vision. Upon realizing the disconnect between his ideals of serving students and the punitive character of his actual teaching, Lopez reformulated his pedagogy to more closely embody the relational traits Freire prescribes: faith and trust in students, and a curriculum intended to help students problematize and understand the political aspects of their experiences. He listened well to his students even when it was painful to do so, and even though he did not fully institute egalitarian relationships in his class, he adjusted his teaching methods in response both to their criticisms and to their personal and political interests (insofar as he understood them). The curriculum came to be politicized to help the students with the ways in which they were stereotyped and to enable them to better understand models of people who pursued a better life for their own communities. Lopez, we might say, was able to open previously closed relationships by taking the student's positionality and political interests as the guide for curriculum.

OPENNESS TO STUDENTS: TODD'S LEVINASIAN PEDAGOGY

As most strong teachers, Lopez was not seeking doctrinal purity, and his efforts towards opening the relationships with his students veered away from the Freirean vision and contained aspects that might be better understood by appealing to the Levinasian pedagogical thought of Sharon Todd. Unlike Freire, who sought in a Marxian mode to offer a theory where a political-economic analysis of power relationships was intertwined with an ethical vision of pedagogical possibility, Levinasian theory shows little concern with social and economic explanations of educational injustices and focuses instead upon the ethical possibilities of face-to-face encounters. Consequently, Todd's employment of Levinas likewise focuses on the ethical practices that might create relational openings between students and teachers. Todd seeks to aid teachers who want nonviolent relations with students, and her central plea is for teachers to adopt an ethical stance of openness toward their students.⁹ In some important ways, we can find Todd's prescriptions realized in Lopez's pedagogy.

In contrast to Freire, Todd is unwilling to offer principles or pedagogical practices designed to overcome the gulf created by the teachers' and students' respective positionalities. She would probably balk at Freire's definitions of his students as "oppressed," as people with a "submerged consciousness."¹⁰ She argues that a teacher will be more open when she abandons the false assurance that she knows her students, or a reliance upon pedagogical methods or theories which are premised on presumed understandings of students, and relies instead upon embodied engagement with students — feeling her way to responsiveness to the other (*LO*,

15). Extending existential phenomenological principles, which suggest that our conscious thought is far less adroit, nuanced, and responsive than what Merleau-Ponty referred to as prepredicative understandings of the “body subject,”¹¹ Todd looks hopefully to those moments of pedagogical exchange where teachers and students lose their scripts and anxiously search for be the best ways to respond to one another. “[I]t is,” she says, “the disruptive, unpredictable time of attentiveness to the Other where ethical possibility lies...because our capacity to relate to others is premised on our susceptibilities, vulnerabilities, and openness to the Other, and not on knowledge” (*LO*, 9).

Todd’s belief in the potential of embodied responsiveness leads her to argue for an “implied ethics,” that is, a pedagogical ethics that arises out of the specific interactions of a particular group of students and teachers. Educational philosophy — in her mind — has largely operated using “applied ethics,” that is, when the ethical principles from other contexts are imported into a particular relational context (*LO*, 14). Freire would surely appear from Todd’s perspective to be one of those educators who applies an ethics derived from some other realm — in this case, organizing and social activism — to pedagogy and, in the process, prejudices the appropriate roles of students and teachers as well as the desired trajectories of their acts. This prejudging for Todd and Levinas is a form of violence; instead of relating to her or his students as complex and undefinable beings who always bring to the relationship “more than the teacher can contain,” critical pedagogy prepares the teacher to view students as oppressed peoples in need of consciousness raising. Pedagogically, this violence leads the teacher to look for and affirm particular responses from students while neglecting, silencing, or redirecting responses that fall outside of the vision of student as potential political activist (*LO*, 7).

Now, Lopez identifies himself with critical pedagogy, but the description he offers us of the process whereby his classroom relationships went from closed to open mixes elements of Freire’s applied ethics with aspects of an implied ethics. Lopez’s allegiance to Freire might be supplemented by the articulations offered by Todd and Levinas, for Lopez found his way to a politically committed pedagogy, but only through an uncertain process in which his openness and vulnerability became the primary guide. At the point that he abandoned his traditional pedagogy, he was not the decisive vanguard educator Freire envisions; rather, he was shaken and uncertain, feeling his way towards an approach that would transform the classroom from a ground of conflict to a forum for meaningful learning. At the point where he shifted his pedagogy, he was seeking a way to realize his own felt caring for his students.

The teachers in Freire’s texts are challenged by students, and indeed he exhorts them to be humble, but humility appears in Freire’s work as a matter of understanding the limits of one’s own knowledge, and the power of the student’s knowledge.¹² It is a stance that is decided upon by the teacher, whereas Lopez’s vulnerability was thrust upon him as he sought a relational atmosphere within which he could teach in a way that lived up to his own sentiments of what respect looked like in the classroom. The vulnerability of which Todd speaks is truly a teacher who is not

longer in control of his classroom — one who is looking into the field of relationships for possibilities and who is willing to completely change their discipline and curriculum (as Lopez did). In Todd's analysis, it makes perfect sense that Lopez reached a more respectful pedagogical approach through the path of vulnerability. Reliance upon a prescribed theory or set of principles denies a teacher her greatest ethical sensitivities, the openness that comes from searching for an appropriate response at a time when one's principles have already failed us. Lopez's frantic search for a response to his students occurs in the space which Todd considers most fruitful, "when learning is not about understanding the other but about a relation to otherness prior to understanding" (*LO*, 9).

RECONCILING *PRAXIS* AND NONVIOLENT STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

As we seek an answer to the ethical question of "what does it mean for teachers to show respect across the divides of race and class, when the teacher is already positioned as a custodian of an unjust status quo?" the tensions between Freirean *praxis* and Todd's pursuit of nonviolent student-teacher relationships prove to be most helpful. Freire helps us understand the ethical possibilities of Lopez's classroom in a concrete manner that theorizes the very real constraints upon Lopez and his students, and Todd's search for nonviolent student-teacher relationships offers us a continual counter to the ever-present tendency in both pedagogy and philosophy to reduce students to totalizing descriptions.

Let us first consider the ways in which Freire's social ontology (with a bit of supplementation) helps us theorize the limits placed upon Lopez's and the students' possibilities. Freire's structural account of the respective positions of the students and teacher leads us to expect tension when they all meet in the classroom. Freire's existential phenomenology — along with philosophical discussions of "being with" — aids our understanding of the adversarial field of classroom relationships described by Lopez; a play of discipline and resistance characterized the being-with of the classroom, tossing students and teachers to and fro — culminating with the fight between one student and Lopez.¹³ Todd might direct our attention to the ways in which Lopez's disciplinary pedagogy already defined his students as the unruly sort of people who needed a type of tough love, and this violence was met with counter violence. Even though Todd and Freire would counsel against Lopez's authoritarian pedagogy, we should also recognize that his ethical possibilities were shaped by the social field that he walked into: the students' declaration of his immanent failure surely called out the most stern variations of Lopez's pedagogical style, and his prison pedagogy maintained the relational closures he inherited, for the students surely felt no motivation to open up to a man who appeared to be carrying out the sort of surveillance that they witness throughout much of their daily lives.

It is critical that we note how Lopez and his students transformed the adversarial *mitsein* of the classroom and eventually opened their relationships with one another. Oddly, Lopez's doctrinal commitment to Marxism operated in concert with an aspect of openness and vulnerability. During that early period in which his classroom strategies were floundering, Lopez's politically inspired care for his students — although abstract and in tension with the actual face-to-face relationships —

prevented him from dismissing his students as the problem, and forced him to continually scrutinize his own mistakes, when a less motivated teacher would probably have written the students off. Indeed, we might say that Lopez gained the strength for his openness and vulnerability from his Marxist convictions. Even as he was exerting his disciplinary curriculum, Lopez kept an open ear to the charges students made against him. While his prison pedagogy could hardly be considered an explicit embodiment of Todd's call for openness, Lopez continued to listen to the students and puzzle over their statements even when it was extremely hurtful. That is, instead of claiming that he knew his students, he took their disruptions to be mysteries to be understood and responded to. We could say that he was listening for that which he did not understand, and it's his eventual personal and pedagogical transformation that allows him to thoughtfully place many of these hurtful episodes in perspective.

Despite his attentiveness to the students' disgruntlement, Lopez still could not find an avenue of response that would alter the adversarial being-with of the classroom that held him and the students in its grip. Only the paradigmatic expression and hence the complete breakdown of that oppositional *mitsein*, the fight, opened the path of vulnerability. For the fight signaled the total failure of Lopez's pedagogy, at the same time that it established his macho credentials in an all male class — thus making it possible to show weakness. Lopez was now propelled into a stance of profound vulnerability. Ontologically, Lopez's transformation publicly acknowledged his complete immersion in and dependence upon the to and fro of classroom exchanges; it signaled the necessity of following the field of classroom relations instead of his egoistic conception of authority. By abandoning a highly structured surveillance pedagogy, Lopez created new intersubjective space — a sort of relational void — into which the students could step.

The pedagogical ethics that accompanied this ontological opening was a hybrid of openness and treason. In contrast to Freire's prioritization of political action, Lopez was most concerned with developing trusting and respectful relationships with the students. Lopez reports that his most important statement to the students professed his care for them, and this care was no longer the abstract and politically motivated care of the Marxist, but the sort of care Todd calls for, an embodied responsiveness developed in relation with the students. When a student refused to believe that he could possibly care for them, Lopez's open-ended counter — that the students should look and see whether his actions matched his words — signaled his willingness to accept the students' judgments as the last word. In this nuanced process of negotiation, Lopez was seeking to reconstitute the *mitsein* of the classroom, from adversarial to collegial. To do so, a foundation of trusting relationships had to be established.

While absolutely critical to the success of Lopez's reformulated pedagogy, his openness would not have been sufficient to establish Lopez's trustworthiness. Since Lopez was already constituted as a guardian of an unjust status quo, and this identity was in sharp opposition to the students' identities, Lopez would only be able to earn the students' trust by criticizing those institutions with which the students identified

him. If Lopez had done no more than emphasized his openness to students, it would be less likely to call out powerful student responses, because such openness could be in service of a system of surveillance and control. Here, Lopez's adaptation of Freirean principles and his interest in stimulating and emboldening the students' understanding of injustices — through lectures on stereotypes and racism — operates to establish his treasonous identification with the students — beyond the institutional dictates of middle-class propriety. Lopez's lectures on racism "leapt ahead" of the students, marking a path for them to follow, and the students responded with new energy because Lopez's now clear reliance upon them called out their own commitments to a better life for themselves and their communities.¹⁴

If we say that Lopez successfully reconciled Freirean critical pedagogy with Levinasian openness, we must immediately qualify the statement, for Lopez embodied an open posture only at key junctures of the class, and even in these moments, his openness emerged as one aspect of a tangled social context, and it was enabled and constrained by Lopez's own doctrinal and pedagogical commitments. His openness was never a pure passivity, but it was a willingness to submit himself to the intense negotiations of the intersubjective play of classroom relations. But, even as he allowed himself to be over taken by the intersubjective flux of the classroom, he was seeking to reemerge with a newly codified doctrine and pedagogy. As Todd would suggest, Lopez's immersion in the prepredicative field of interpersonal negotiation made him a far more sensitive teacher, but he appeared to quickly flee those moments. Faced with this picture where Lopez's openness appears as a relatively brief part of his pedagogical trajectory, we must ask about its meaning. Is the path of nonviolent pedagogy one where the teacher repeatedly returns to the free play of intersubjective relationships to stay on a moral path? Or, is Lopez's story actually a case of a teacher who has rendered openness a mere tool in larger political agenda? Or, lastly, are Lopez's convictions — as Freire would say — absolutely fundamental to his practice, and, in fact, provide the strength and vision that made Lopez's openness possible?

1. Antonia Darder, *Reinventing Paulo Freire* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), 188–192.

2. For example, Signithia Fordham reports that some African-American students resist schools because they view the educational enterprise as a battle in which the school attempts to rob them of their Black identity. See *Blacked Out* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 283. L. Janelle Dance reports cases in which students' street personas involve turning away from schools in *Tough Fronts* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002), 58.

3. Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* (London: Penguin, 1989), 102.

4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1980), 183–4.

5. Lilia Bartolome, "Beyond the Method Fetish," in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, eds. Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano, and Rodolfo Torres (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 411.

6. See, for instance, John Ogbu, *Minority Education and Caste* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1978); Jay MacLeod, *Ain't No Making It* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987).

7. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, trans. Patrick Clark (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 36; Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993), 43,

70–72; Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question*, trans. Tony Coates (New York: Continuum, 1989), 46, 56.

8. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 76; Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Continuum, 1992), 46; Freire and Faundez, *Learning to Question*, 33.

9. Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2003), 11–12. This work will be cited in as *LO* in the text for all subsequent references.

10. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 33.

11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

12. See, for instance, Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, 65.

13. Hans-Georg Gadamer spoke of the game and the way it plays the people who participate in the game in *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 95–96. Gadamer's formulation, which can be extended to think of the social field of the classroom and the way the field plays the students and teacher, was an extension of the discussions of "being-with" or *mitsein* which began when Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* argued that intersubjective relations with others were a basic component of the individual's being. See *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 153–168.

14. Heidegger speaks of "leaping ahead" as one of the liberating modes in which *Dasein* can relate to others, *Being and Time*, 158–9.