

Teaching as and for Activism: Challenges and Possibilities

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As I sit down to write this essay on academic activism, I am struck by a depressing paradox. Writing about activism is hardly an activist endeavor. Indeed, it might be the exact opposite: serving to reproduce certain norms in the academy related to what counts as scholarship, that is, what gets valued and deemed as worthy as I seek (however consciously) an ever more secure and lucrative position in the university where I work. This potential for reproducing abstract, and in many ways irrelevant, “academic” work is especially likely if I reflect on intellectual activism in a “traditional” academic style, appropriately citing key players in the scholarly conversation, and using sophisticated and theoretical language to craft a “serious” argument. Will anybody, other than perhaps a few other scholars, even read this essay? Will it make any difference to how they live their lives? Will studying activism, and attempting to situate my work as activist somehow, make me a better teacher; one who, on my more optimistic days, believes she can perhaps inspire future activists by helping them to develop some of the tools needed to change the world?

Given my deep commitment to social justice, to creating a more equitable, caring, and democratic world, I really want to believe that my scholarship, and more broadly my position in the academy, can somehow serve those goals. But lately I am cynical. We have a long history of scholar activism in the U.S., or at least of scholars claiming their work as activist, yet I wonder what the fruits of our labors have been. Is there an inherent contradiction between action and practice toward social change, and intellectual labor in the hallowed halls of the academy? Is the solace that many of us take in the liberatory potential of our classrooms naïve and misguided? Or, can our classrooms be spaces that breathe life into our most cherished ideals and hopes for a more socially just world?

In this essay, I reflect on what it means to claim teaching as a form of activism. It is fairly common for left-leaning, progressive academics to suggest that their teaching is activist and that the classroom is a unique space of transformative possibility. Because teaching necessarily involves choices — for example, about what content to teach, how to organize and facilitate learning, how to assess students, and what kinds of relationships to establish with them — it is inherently an ethical enterprise. No matter which choices I make in any context, I could have always chosen differently. Thus every action is imbued with values, whether I am aware of them or not. William Ayers captures the normative dimension of teaching well: “teaching is more than transmitting skills; it is a living act, and involves preference and value, obligation and choice, trust and care, commitment and justification.”¹ The belief of many, especially among the general public, that teaching should be neutral, apolitical, and objective is irrational. In reality, teaching that purports to be neutral is teaching that supports the status quo; that reproduces the social order rather than seeking to challenge, disrupt, or transform it.

Critical educators take for granted that teaching is a political act, and that in a democratic society, we should, at the very least, appeal to broadly shared democratic values as criteria for our pedagogical choices. These include freedom of conscience and choice, respect for diversity, defense of individual freedom and rights, and commitment to common goods. These values tend to be broadly shared in the abstract, yet concretizing them in classrooms is always a challenge. Activist teachers claim we ought to be explicit about our value commitments and why we hold them. Pretending to be neutral on the most important social, political, and ethical issues of our time risks modeling moral apathy and passivity. Describing a lesson on globalization and sweatshop labor, Bill Bigelow captures the activist teaching stance well:

I had no desire to feign neutrality — to hide my conviction that people here [in the United States] need to care about and act in solidarity with workers around the world in their struggles for better lives. To pretend that I was a mere dispenser of information would be dishonest, but worse, it would imply that being a spectator is an ethical response to injustice.²

Yet when does such explicitly partisan teaching become indoctrination? Is it possible for activist teachers to take moral stances in the classroom, and to frame curricula and design pedagogical activities around social justice values and commitments, without at the same time stifling genuine inquiry and implicitly forcing students to share their beliefs?

As locations where knowledge is contested, habits are developed, and communities created, classrooms are activist spaces, even if we as teachers are not critically conscious of the impacts of our pedagogical choices, efforts, and relationships. Knowledge and power are inherently linked, and teachers must value some perspectives, positions, arguments, and materials above others. Yet at the same time, the classroom ought not to be a site for advocacy, especially in lieu of inquiry. We should always engage multiple viewpoints and perspectives, and encourage our students to do the same. Some forms of what might be called activist teaching are democratic, justified, and necessary, while others are not. My goal in this essay is to clarify what activist teaching means and to offer a defensible vision of teaching as activism that makes sense of the claim, defended by social justice educators, that while our pedagogical work is inherently activist, it is not at the same time inherently indoctrinating. I begin by describing what it means to claim teaching as and for activism. I then argue why classrooms are inherently activist spaces, especially for social justice educators who believe in education as one means to work towards equity and opportunity for all citizens, and who maintain that teaching is “an act of hope for a better future.”³ Third, I describe some of the challenges of teaching as activism, particularly in institutionalized spaces where practically relevant, community-engaged scholarship is deemed inherently less scholarly and, hence, suspicious. Finally, I respond to some of these challenges, and offer a vision of activist teaching that is defensible in a democratic society.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CLAIM TEACHING AS ACTIVISM?

The term activist evokes a variety of different images. Most often it is associated with people who put their bodies on the line in service of a cause, for example, protesting injustices, participating in rallies, campaigning for certain politicians or

propositions, and working with others to achieve some specific ends, such as banning genetically modified foods, ending fracking, or providing accessible health care to all people. Activism, as the word suggests, implies action. Yet what constitutes “action” is debatable. Is intellectual labor a form of activist labor? Are thinking, reflecting, reading, discussing, and writing forms of activism? For classroom spaces to be considered as legitimate sites of activism, must teaching and learning “make an impact on the world outside of the classroom in ways that are fairly direct and predictable?”⁴ In their book, *Activist Educators: Breaking Past Limits*, Catherine Marshall and Amy Anderson offer a useful working definition of an activist as “an individual who is known for taking stands and engaging in action aimed at producing social change.”⁵ They add that the activism they are most interested in is inherently connected to social justice; that is, “activism aimed at increasing inclusivity, fairness, empowerment, and equity...especially for heretofore oppressed and silenced groups.”⁶ Indeed, many other scholars also connect activism and social justice. For example, Patricia Hill Collins defines intellectual activism as “the myriad ways that people place the power of their ideas in service to social justice,”⁷ while Silvia Bettez maintains that “teaching that consciously foregrounds and promotes social justice is always a form of activist work.”⁸ Scholars who claim their teaching to be a form of activism do so in at least three different ways, which I describe on a spectrum from the broadest and to the most specific. First, some argue that teaching people to think critically about the world and changing their ideas about issues of injustice, privilege, and power is activist teaching. Second, some activist teachers aim not only to transform their student’s understandings, but also to teach them tools, strategies, and tactics for social change, planting seeds for future activist work. Third, frustrated with the romanticization of activism, others claim that activist teachers must be activists themselves, engaging with others in specific, concrete, and tangible forms of direct action.

In the most general sense, teaching is a form of activism when we ask students to think critically about the world: to unpack their assumptions, to consider alternative viewpoints, to dismantle problematic beliefs, to make careful arguments, and to defend their perspectives. In order to act on the world, to be thoughtful democratic citizens, we need to understand how the world operates, which includes the relationships between power, privilege, and knowledge. We need to know how we are shaped by dominant ideologies and discourses, and also that we can change these when we learn to see, think, and act differently. We need to see the connections between problems, to understand how systems and structures operate, and to explore different visions of what could be. Jill Dolan argues that teaching is activism when it changes students’ consciousness, which is essential to “contesting social and cultural structures that perpetuate gender, race and ethnic, class, and sexual inequities.”⁹ It is also activism when it allows us to imagine possibilities and find allies. Indeed, bell hooks writes that in our fragmented world, progressive classrooms “may be the only location where individuals can experience support for acquiring a critical consciousness, for any commitment to end domination.”¹⁰ Ultimately, in the broadest sense, teaching is activist when it supports students in becoming critical, social justice-oriented thinkers in the world.

In a more complex vision of teaching as activism, scholars argue that while raising critical consciousness is necessary, it is not sufficient. Students need not only to be able to think differently, but also they need tools to *act* differently in the world: to speak back to power. In this vision, teaching is activist when we help students to develop skills to organize movements, join ongoing debates, communicate effectively, build coalitions, present their ideas in public, and help others around them to become aware of issues and take action on them. Here, teaching is activism when we cultivate in students the habits necessary for a life of participatory and engaged citizenship, laying the foundation for actions they may take in their lives outside of the classroom, without presuming or dictating what those actions should be. For example, Nicolas Fox argues that when he teaches literature as a tactic for reading both a political climate and possibilities for responding to that climate, he is developing future activists. He writes “by using the classroom to plant the seeds of political action in the wider world, I will have not just taught students about politics, but empowered them in the practice of politics.”¹¹ In this vision of activism, classroom spaces help to change consciousness and cultivate habits, both necessary for any work toward social justice.

A third vision of teaching as activism is perhaps the most radical as it entails the expectation of concrete actions in the world. For example, the curriculum might involve service-learning projects that take students out of the classroom and into non-profit agencies working for social justice, such as homeless shelters, medical clinics, and food cooperatives. Or it might entail classroom projects that speak back to power: letters to the editor of newspapers, participation in rallies, productions of guerilla theater, and visits to legislators. The argument here is that critical thinking skills must be put to work; that we must be able to see their tangible impacts in communities and in the lives of citizens. Moreover, teachers themselves must be conspicuously involved in activist organizations if they are to have legitimacy in teaching for social justice. Theresa Montaño and her coauthors distinguish a teacher activist from teachers who foreground social justice issues in their work, and suggest that teacher activists are critical of “social justice teachers in thought only — who believe in the central tenets of critical pedagogy but who do not enact them in their own teaching and who are not active in social movements.”¹² In this vision of teaching as activism, teachers themselves are committed to “standing up to oppression” and are “engaged in ongoing and collective action to rally against the ways that schooling reproduces existing inequalities and maintains the status quo.”¹³ Here, teachers themselves are activists; they do not simply teach about or for activism.

Certainly there are other possible visions of teaching as and for activism, though these three capture the prevailing images found in the literature. Given the range of meanings, it is not always clear what scholars actually mean when they claim their teaching as activism, that is, what this implies in practice. Teaching about power dynamics so as to raise consciousness is clearly less risky, and less overtly political, and consequently less potentially indoctrinating, than requiring out of the classroom engagements with activist groups as part of the curriculum. Yet it is also important to note that none of these visions of activist teaching imply that teachers are involved

with telling students what they should think, how they should act, or what causes they should support. That is, none inherently entail dogmatism or indoctrination, even though this is the charge leveled by many who would claim that we should keep politics out of the classroom. For social justice educators, the classroom is inherently an activist space.

CLASSROOMS AS INHERENTLY ACTIVIST

Teachers who teach for social justice, who aim to transform inequitable power relations and oppressive systems and structures, maintain that, as classrooms are always already political and moral spaces, we must be aware of the political posture and stance we take, both there and in the world beyond the school walls. Unpacking this idea, Ayers argues that “teachers must always choose — they must choose how to see the students before them, and how to see the world as well, what to embrace and what to reject, whether to support or resist this or that directive.”¹⁴ If we define an activist as one who takes a stance and acts in accordance with it, then the principles that motivate those stances will inevitably influence actions in the classroom. For example, they will influence the materials a teacher chooses, the assignments s/he creates, and the purposes s/he articulates for her courses (even within broadly shared guidelines and standards). This does not mean, however, that teachers can choose to do whatever they wish in their classrooms. Rather, it means that there is no neutral, objective, apolitical classroom space, where teachers can simply, as Stanley Fish argues, “introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry” that he claims are shared by scholars in a field.¹⁵ There are those, like Fish, who argue that to ask more of education than the transmission of knowledge and skills is to compromise the integrity of teachers, and so they should not be concerned with serving civic purposes or other political ends.

However, most educators both recognize that knowledge and skills are never without context and always involve subjectivity, and agree that at least one purpose for education is to help us to live better, more meaningful lives together on this planet (even as there are bound to be many different perspectives on what this means in practice). As Paulo Freire so eloquently argues, teaching as mere transmission is fundamentally oppressive; it treats knowledge as something fixed and incontrovertible, and learners as receptacles to be filled as opposed to subjects who, by “assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons,” can learn to transform their worlds.¹⁶ Teachers who believe that education involves more than an abstract list of standards to be mastered view curricula as a space for students to “encounter the world — its histories and peoples — analyze its current conditions, and prepare to act on the world in moral and responsible ways.”¹⁷ They believe that teaching always involves reflecting on disciplinary content (including seemingly shared knowledge bases and dominant discourses), exploring a range of alternative perspectives on that content, and considering why and how that content might matter to how we live our lives.

To suggest that classrooms are inherently activist spaces is to contest the artificial dichotomy between knowledge and politics. Power and ideas are always

interconnected, and what we deem as knowledge inevitably gets imbued with power. Yet ideas are not static, they are regularly debated, contested, challenged, rejected, and reformed. Indeed, Collins maintains that how we discuss, reflect upon, and engage ideas is itself a form of action. She writes: “academia is activist politics, where struggles over the meaning of ideas constitute the primary terrain of action.”¹⁸ Teachers who center social justice in their classrooms also foreground this struggle over ideas and how ideas matter with their students, suggesting that classroom learning should always be connected to broader democratic values and visions for how to best live together. Minimally, this should involve maximizing individual rights and freedoms while developing a broad sense of responsibility for common goods. Moreover, social justice educators presuppose that “teaching is a profession with certain inalienable purposes, among them challenging the inequities in access and opportunity that curtail the freedom of some individuals and some groups to obtain a high equality education.”¹⁹ Ultimately, when we teach, we have some vision in our minds of the good, the ethical, and the just, even if we might struggle to articulate it. Yet the move from recognizing that our choices are never neutral, to claiming pedagogy as activist, is not without challenges.

CHALLENGES TO TEACHING AS ACTIVISM

We face a number of challenges when we claim teaching to be a form of activism. David Meyer argues, for example, that the jobs of academics and activists are fundamentally different, especially as “scholars veer into theoretical abstractions that, while potentially useful to building basic knowledge, are so far removed from often urgent contemporary questions that their works are easily ignored.”²⁰ At the same time, engaging in projects with community activists is rarely valued or rewarded in the academy. Combining scholarship with activism is practically, institutionally, and ideologically challenging. Practically speaking, there is no guarantee that teaching students to think critically and even ethically results in any difference to how they live their lives. In fact, critical thinking can sometimes be paralyzing. When students are able to see various sides to every issue and understand multiple different perspectives, rather than feeling informed and empowered, they often become overwhelmed by the range of seemingly defensible options in any given situation. Access to increasing volumes of information can be incapacitating when it comes to making normative decisions. George Counts has warned of the dangers of abstract critical thinking, as it can lead one to become the type of individual “who adopts an agnostic attitude toward every important social issue, who can balance the pros against the cons with the skill of a juggler, who sees all sides of every question and never commits himself to any, who delays action until all the facts are in, [and] who knows that all the facts will never come in.”²¹ Even as students seem to have their consciousness raised in classroom spaces, there is no guarantee that this actually impacts how they live their lives.

From an institutional perspective, activist work is not only not rewarded in the tenure and promotion process, it is also often denigrated as not real scholarship, especially when it is not translated into the capital of academics: refereed journal articles. To keep our positions in the academy, we are typically expected to write

in certain ways (often dispassionate and seemingly objective ways, and rarely for popular audiences); to publish our work in disciplinary journals that tend to encourage abstract theorizing; to teach in a safe, noncontroversial fashion; and to seek external funding for our research, even though funding agencies are rarely interested in radical or transformative projects. David Croteau describes how research and pedagogical processes are distorted by pressure to exhibit “academic” not community-engaged or activist skills, including “mastering the field’s jargon, tempering language so as to evoke a detached scholarly stance, and proper genuflection to the leaders in the field.”²² Moreover, the evaluation of scholarship and teaching usually proceeds through “relentlessly individual and individualizing processes” of quantifying and qualifying one’s contribution to a university and a disciplinary field, while activism encourages “collective, collaborative, and social thinking.”²³ The concern for activists is to alter unjust and inequitable policies, practices, and social relations. This is work that is rarely marked by refereed publications or the dispassionate teaching of conventional wisdom in a disciplinary field.

While practical and institutional constraints to teaching as activism are challenging, perhaps the most damning critique of activist teaching is that it is tantamount to liberal bias. While I don’t have the space here to do justice to this critique, Barbara Applebaum thoughtfully demonstrates how teaching for social justice is not inherently liberal bias, and how the charge of bias itself is generally grounded in the problematic assumption that teachers somehow can adopt a neutral, apolitical stance in the classroom. While social justice educators maintain that there is much social injustice in the world, and that none of us stand outside of the power relations that sustain such injustice, they do not simply tell students how or what to think about various forms of injustice. That is, they do not impose ideological viewpoints; they instead illustrate how ideology functions to make some viewpoints seem natural and inevitable, and others radical or irrational. As Applebaum argues: “what social justice educators require of all of their students is engagement but not necessarily agreement. The aim is to gain understanding.”²⁴ While activist teachers often demand engagement with non-dominant discourses, they do not, in principle, prescribe what students ought to think or do (even as some might problematically do this in practice).

DEFENDING TEACHING AS ACTIVISM

There is no doubt that some teachers abuse their positions by implicitly and explicitly forcing students to adopt certain stances or worldviews; yet these teachers are exceptions rather than the norm. Principled activist teachers politically engage their students by introducing critical perspectives on the world, foregrounding issues of equity and justice, challenging taken-for-granted perspectives, and connecting ideas to the real world. They do not prescribe what students ought to think or how they ought to act. An activist approach to teaching is not one that involves advocating for specific positions or stances, yet it is one that is grounded in commitments to justice, human flourishing, and the alleviation of suffering. It requires, as Celia Oyler writes, “direct engagement with other humans to work towards improvement of the human condition and the common good.”²⁵

While I do not have the space here to flesh out detailed principles to fully support the vision of teaching as activism that I have been drawing throughout this essay, it should be clear by now that activist teaching is not inherently indoctrinating, at least no more than any other pedagogical approach that requires educators to choose materials, activities, priorities, emphases, and assessments. What marks activist teaching is the explicit commitment made by teachers to link their social consciousness to their conduct in the classroom in supporting common, democratic goods. Activist teachers also always ask students to make connections between classroom learning and their everyday lives. They model for students the capacity to think about complex problems in the world, to work with others to address them, and to commit to some positions and ethical stances rather than others, while remaining open to changing their worldviews. They fear that by trying to take a distanced and “neutral” position on local and global challenges, they reproduce moral apathy and habitual disengagement. Yet they also remain humble and self-critical, exposing students to multiple perspectives and creating opportunities for students to defend a range of viewpoints on any issue. Of course, activist teaching can be done badly, and students can feel their views and beliefs are stifled in the classroom. However, this is not an argument for neutrality as much as it is for self-reflection, openness, tolerance, and humility in the classroom, as well as for collaboration with others in the school to ensure that no teacher abuses the power of their position.

In the end, teachers who claim the classroom as an activist space believe that “education is not training, and learning at its best is connected with the imperatives of social responsibility and political agency.”²⁶ They believe the classroom is always a space of transformative possibility and take seriously their role in facilitating that possibility. Activist teachers are engaged citizens who ask students to become the same. It is easy to condemn activism in the classroom when we don’t have a clear sense of what it means, and especially when the dangers of ideological dogmatism and indoctrination are ever present. Yet at a time of conservative backlash against teaching for social justice, we need to speak back to these forces and show the power of the classroom to help us to imagine alternative futures. We need to talk even more about the classroom as a space of and for possibility. Activist teaching is about reawakening this possibility. It is also about resistance to a world where our senses are deadened to suffering and where schooling is reduced to simply mastering a set of common core standards. Geneva Gay suggests that we need to educate students to resist conformity, complacency, concession, clonism, and singularity, or the belief that there is one right answer or way to be in the world.²⁷ Teaching as and for activism is one way to sustain hope and possibility in the world. While there are risks involved with any pedagogy, engagement with the great struggles of the world is surely preferable to passionless teaching that is conceived of as primarily transmission of abstract knowledge and skills. Activist teachers maintain that “it is important to be both a dreamer and a doer, to hold onto ideals but to struggle continuously to enact those ideals in concrete situations.”²⁸ In struggling to enact the ideal of a more just world, activist teaching becomes teaching that actually matters.

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4. Cathryn Bailey, "Teaching as Activism and Excuse: A Reconsideration of the Theory-Practice Dichotomy," *Feminist Teacher* 13, no. 3 (2001): 126.
5. Catherine Marshall and Amy L. Anderson, *Activist Educators: Breaking Past Limits* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 18.
6. *Ibid.*, 18.
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8. Silvia Cristina Bettez, "Social Justice Activist Teaching in the University Classroom," in *Unsettling Beliefs: Teaching Theory to Teachers*, ed. Josh Diem and Robert J. Helfenbein (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishers, 2008), 275.
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15. Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12–13.
16. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 45.
17. Celia Oyler, *Actions Speak Louder than Words: Community Activism as Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.
18. Collins, *On Intellectual Activism*, 147.
19. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Joan Barnatt, Randall Lahann, Karen Shakman, and Dianna Terrell, "Teacher Education for Social Justice: Critiquing the Critiques," in *Handbook of Social Justice in Education*, ed. William Ayers, Therese Quinn, and David Stovall (New York: Routledge, 2009), 636.
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