

In Their Own Voices: Community College Students Address ‘Revolution’

In our country there needs to be a revolution. This revolution must start with our thinking. We are a society of boastfulness, when very few of us really have anything to be boastful about. We hang onto our capitalist ideas and ideology as if any other way would surely send us spiraling out of control. We very rarely see or care about the needs of others or the needs of the whole. We are a ‘me first’ society and a ‘look at me’ society. This manner of thinking has taken us down the rabbit hole.

—Young African-American female community college student

Four- and two-year educational matters are frequently in the headlines these days. A regular topic is whether higher education should be tuition-free, much like it is with public schools. While I believe it should be free, for the purpose of this article, I want to focus on the content of that education.

The concept “critical” seems key here. We pay lip service to critical thinking; yet perhaps the Bernie Sanders political campaign, popular with students, should prompt us to reconsider what counts as being critical. Surely the hallmarks of being critical about something include being able to question premises, to turn a question around, and to refuse drop-down choices. To illustrate, let me go back two and a half years to what I call my “revolutionary semester.”

“Feel the Bern” may have arisen swiftly and unexpectedly. However, in 2013-14, there were already precursors of the movement in my community college classes. If other professors at that time were conducting their classes as I was mine, maybe our combined student populations were the start of a ripple toward the tide we see today. During that year, I tried radical experiments that I hadn’t dare try since my first years of teaching. (See *“Remediation for a Democratic Society.” Innovation Abstracts, NISOD, The University of Texas at Austin, Vol. 5, No. 28, Oct. 7, 1983.*)

By spring 2013, I couldn’t go on. I was entering into what would become my last year and a half of teaching, and I had lost the sense that I was contributing to something good. Convince my students to work hard in liberal arts to join the elite? How distasteful, especially in the year of Robert Reich’s film *Inequality for All*, a seemingly endless war, ecological alarm and impasse,

and the year Elizabeth Warren said in an interview on CNN Tonight, “Let’s just be real clear—the game is rigged and it’s rigged in favor of those who have money and who have power.”

Moreover, community colleges have changed. A few decades ago community colleges were in significant ways intellectual spaces. Several features made this possible: pluralist educational philosophy, empowered faculty, adequate public funding, organic administration, and less severe income inequality. However, a “culture of outcomes” was imposed as structural re-adjustment. Contrary to classical and critical pedagogy, learning was narrowed to workforce preparation, faculty were disempowered, public funding was gutted, and administration was corporatized. As a result, inequality widened.

My last year and a half would, as it happened, be a young administrator’s first year and a half as our liberal arts dean. As a result of our respective positions, we should have been on opposite sides of many issues. One of us “reported to” the other, in the language of corporations. However, our personalities and characters were very similar. Our collaboration was based not on political, but humane agreement.

The approaching fresh air of retirement made me about as free as a person can be under a neoliberal regime, protected from the market’s unregulated brutality four different ways, which included tenure, the union, civil service laws, and by being able to say at any time, “I’m out of here.” However, whereas I felt I could say and do what I wanted, our liberal arts dean was restrained. At the beginning of her professional career, for which she had gone back to school after a Ph.D. in literature, she was hemmed in by the full onslaught of “professional correctness” rules that had descended upon community colleges in the anxiety-ridden period of “outcomes,” “accountability,” “uniform goals,” and “standardized syllabi.”

So, during the week of the 50th anniversary of the John F. Kennedy assassination, I was teaching Philosophy 101 for the 75th time. Our liberal arts dean was conducting a routine professional classroom observation, and 100 students, whose names by mutual agreement were to remain confidential, were sharing drafts of an in-class essay. I first shared my own draft of a possible letter to the editor that raised critical questions about JFK’s death. Then 100 students—ethnically diverse and majority lower-middle class—discussed their own drafts. My handout stipulated that they write a philosophy for a revolution that would bring about

more liberty and justice for all. The guidelines were as follows:

1. Interpret the word "revolution" broadly. It could refer not only to the old Marxist change from a capitalist society to a socialist society, but also to:

- Deep-reaching cultural change;
- The process of decolonization;
- The emergence of the feminine;
- Deep changes in a particular institution, such as education;
- Scientific or epistemological revolution (i.e., revolution in the classic sense);
- Deep nonviolent social change;
- Small radical steps, such as civil disobedience; and
- Even to a renewal of the original revolution of John Locke and John Stuart Mill, such as in the way libertarians have used the word revolution.

2. Feel free to fight with the word itself; perhaps you prefer "revolt" (a more postmodern word), "rebellion," or "resistance."

3. Feel free even to reject the whole premise of the question. In other words, you might want to argue that we now have plenty of liberty and justice for all. However, don't change the topic completely.

4. Realize that you have been offered this question, appropriate to philosophy, as an invitation to step outside some of the boundaries you may usually set for yourself. You may think you are supposed to investigate carefully what "they" want you to say and then just say it. This is your chance to go beyond that. You may transgress, but be civil.

Later that week, students in three sections penned two- to three-page responses. What follows is a representative sample of their work.

Many focused on the socioeconomic system:

'A': Society under capitalism, or any other suppressive system, is like a wounded dog that is so obedient to its master that it will hide its ailments, or wounds, to continue its life as it already is...

Many people today are sick and tired of the current system of a life of servitude to the super rich, but at the same time most people are too scared to show it. They are scared of change. They are surrounded by slogans, commercials... More people must realize that it is in our makeup that we are a cooperative species....

'B': In this era, there is a growing gap of inequality in everything.... I believe that all should be more equal by making the start of life be at the same level... use small radical steps to initiate a gradual rebellion.... The people in society must be allowed to become accustomed to the changes gradually... a person should be given the same education as everyone else, and as Marx wanted it, it is to be a free education.... Ultimately I know that as humans we cannot be equal all the time... So, after you had been given all equal education, the equality would

come to an end.... As Mill and Locke pointed out, to you would be given the liberties to do what you want.... You will have to earn everything you believe you deserve.

Some focused on education:

'C': Although there are many issues within America that I would like to tackle, I firmly believe it all begins with education. It is apparent to me that our society has taken the delectable fruit of knowledge and smashed it down to be spoon-fed to our youth. I observe our youth today, sitting in their square desks as their teachers rant about Columbus, the great hero who "found" America.... Our educational system is nothing more than a cave of darkness...we are fooled by the shadows which our government places before us. Today we measure the knowledge of our young students in numbers and test scores.... Students should be taught to utilize their problem solving, creativity, and comprehension skills without heavy aid from the teachers....

'D': My personality or determined mindset did not get me to the place I am today, only my GPA did.... The educational system alarms me...ever since Descartes' idea of mechanical thinking...this quantitative and/or mechanical way of thinking has turned potentially honorable students into stressed-out, overworked human beings who will never feel good enough.... My soul does not belong to the average of how many A's and B's I've received.... With enough people and time, this could be the end of numbers, and the beginning of a soulful generation....

Others focused on gender:

'E': The disempowerment of women not only harms the quality of life of women, but men and non-binary genders as well.... A feminist social revolution can cure our world of female oppression and allow for everyone to have liberty and justice.

Women have been wrongly accused of being irrational and thinking not with logic, but with uncontrollable emotions. As (feminist epistemologist) Allison Jaggar points out, "Women appear to be more emotional than men because they, along with some groups of people of color, are permitted and even required to express emotion more openly...." The patriarchy has taught everyone that feminists are man-hating radicals. Much to the contrary, a feminist is anyone who recognizes the equality and full humanity of all.... Actual feminists can be women, men, or anything in-between.

Some focused on race:

'F': Racism has really not (disappeared) over the years. There are so many children suffering because of it...people are so ignorant and keep revoking

certain rights away that people thought they had.... My neighbors won't let their grandchildren play (with) my children because their stepfather is black.... When they go to school the black girls pick on my two white daughters.... I do not see color. My children do not either. So why are parents still teaching children this? The other issue is the cops always pick up Spanish and black people before they will arrest a white person. This is ridiculous and unacceptable....

Our liberal arts dean in her official observation that day commended me by saying, "Dr. Conroy's compassion is palpable; students respond well to his supportive, safe classroom environment," and "Dr. Conroy utilizes open-ended questions throughout his lesson, encouraging students to apply critical-thinking skills. His examples from the assigned readings helped students understand how to build support and lines of reasoning for their essays."

Is such a "revolutionary semester" replicable? Millennial instructors, of course, do not share the luxury of being near retirement. Yet, imagine not only philosophers, but sociologists, political scientists, geographers, historians, and writing teachers uniting in a movement to create problem-oriented courses like "Interdisciplinary Seminar 101: Systemic Change," which perhaps are not as shrill, but are even more effective. Imagine such a course at every community college.

Remaking community college along such lines—call it public critical—might actually rekindle "a future we can believe in."

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