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Resistance Is Fertile: (Or Everything I Know about Teaching I Learned in Yoga Class)

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CHAPTER 23

Resistance Is Fertile^{*}

(Or Everything I Know about Teaching I Learned in Yoga Class)

Robert Schroeder

Introduction

Looking at yoga from the outside, it seems like it's about trying to contort yourself into awkward pretzel shapes. But from the inside, it is really about the awareness that arises when you try to ease your body into scary and unusual places. Does this sound a little like reflective teaching?

Be aware of discomfort, the resistance to discomfort, and even the resistance to being aware of discomfort—we can use this awareness in our classrooms just as we do on the yoga mat. What if we envision our class organically, as if it were a body moving through different postures? Some parts are working really well, but other parts aren't. In order to improve, we need to look at what isn't working, what feels uncomfortable, and what we constantly turn away from. By consciously looking toward the resistance, we may find that this refocusing will begin to ease the discomfort. Our stopping to gaze creates a pause, a space we can enter. Now we can make adjustments to what we're doing in order to make things work better.

In my own practice (in my classroom), I've found that often the unease

^{*} I got this phrase from the Flickr photo on Ian Beilin's article "Beyond the Threshold: Conformity, Resistance, and the ACRL Information Literacy Framework for Higher Education," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, February 25, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/beyond-the-threshold-conformity-resistance-and-the-acrl-information-literacy-framework-for-higher-education>.

or resistance I feel comes from students—and I often react by resisting their resistance! But I can choose to look at the students and their push-back as an ally in creating better instruction rather than as a hindrance to be ignored. It's scary, and each time I have to breathe deep and trust my practice, but this reflection on what students are doing and saying, or not doing and not saying, helps me to be a better critical pedagogue. In engaging with their resistance, I begin to share the teaching role with the students, and I become more of a student myself.

This is an example of what Paulo Freire describes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.”¹

Outcomes

- Become aware of resistance and patterns of resistance in your classroom
- Reflect on the things that might be causing the resistance and the role you play in the classroom dynamic
- See students and their resistance as allies in the co-production of better learning experiences
- Begin to build up the habits of reflection and awareness, and begin to trust these processes
- When things seem to not be working in the classroom, be willing to engage with students to find out how to do things better

Menu of Exercises

This is about recognizing habits and then taking steps to change them. So these exercises are meant to help us become more aware of where resistance is in our classes. The exercises are listed from more reflective to more externally dialogic. Try the ones that seem to fit, then move into those that seem a bit scary.

Post-Class Reflection

After class, think back on what didn't seem to work. Where did you feel resistance from the class? Try to notice exactly when you became aware something wasn't working. What were the clues?

Resistance Journal

Turn your reflections on student resistance up a notch by jotting down them down in a journal. Jot down not only *what* you noticed but also think about *why* it might have been happening—was it something in the room, maybe in the timing of an exercise, maybe in the content or learning modality? (You may not be right about why it was happening, but it will get you thinking.) Look at your journal over time to see if there are patterns.

Reflexive Reflectivity

When you are thinking about resistance in your classroom, begin to reflect on your own thoughts and actions as well. When you encountered resistance in the classroom, what did you think or feel? What did you do?

Imagining

As you reflect on some of the resistance situations in your class, use your imagination to go further. Make up a story in which you engaged with the resistance or the students to effectively move beyond the situation.

Talk to a Colleague

Set up a time to meet with a colleague. Tell them what you're seeing and what you think the causes might be. Begin to think together of ways to make things better.*

Check In with the Group

Sometimes during a class, in the middle of something, you begin to get clues that it's not working. Try checking in with the group—maybe an anonymous electronic poll or maybe asking the group questions like “What's working here and what's not working?”

Engaging with Student Feedback

When you notice a student pushing back on a question or exercise, take a deep breath and follow along. With an open-ended or clarifying question, ask for

* This is a slimmed-down version of the practice of “reflective peer coaching” applied to the issue of student resistance. For more detailed explanation of the broader method, see Dale Vidmar, “Reflective Peer Coaching: Crafting Collaborative Self-assessment in Teaching,” *Research Strategies* 20, no. 3 (2005): 135–48.

more information. Be willing to move out of the planned lesson and maybe out of your comfort zone and try to understand where the resistance is coming from. Be the student, and let the student be the teacher. Maybe other classmates can also help you all move forward as well.

Conclusions/Thoughts

This isn't the easiest process (for me), but I've found it to be a fruitful one. When I've engaged creatively with a "student disruption," I found that real understanding has often been the result. I've also noticed a corollary benefit—when the other students in the class see me in authentic dialogue with a fellow student, it seems that for the rest of the class they feel more empowered to speak up as well. It's as if I've given them permission to share what they're really experiencing too. When students share their feelings and desires for their own learning, there's no telling where a class might go—be prepared for an interesting and transformative ride!

Note

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2009), 80.

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