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Philosophy in the Wilderness

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“Philosophy in the Wilderness”

I told them the first day that my father taught me to speak like this, but if they hear anything that sounds like this: “I’m from New Yawk. So, if I stahht tawkin like thdis, you know I’m pissed awf.”

They are from small Oregon towns with a Dairy Queen and a 7 Eleven, maybe a bit bigger – a library and a feed store, an elementary school and a paved road to the beach. Her family lives in Newberg and they are the only Asian American family in town. “Are you having a good year being an exchange student?” “No, I was born here. I speak English well thank you very much.” . Her family lives in New York. She has pink hair, a tongue post and an eyebrow pierce and her parents want her to go to college. She had to get away, so she agreed and came to Portland State They went to the same high school, but she has a boy friend and he watches fondly after her. She covers for his shyness and he is grateful . . . He wants to be an actor and may be, but he is absent-minded he doesn’t know if he has the syllabus anymore or not. In the video store: “Dr. Ross what is due on Monday?” I am with my three-year-old daughter born in China: “I don’t know off hand. Check the syllabus.” “I’d don’t have the syllabus anymore . . . I guess that’s my problem.” . . . His parents were hippies in the seventies and he is attracted to the Paolo Friere reading, “The Banking Concept of Education.” He challenges me all year long when I give him guidelines to write a research paper proposal She won’t say a word. She is embarrassed because her English is poor. She says that she has never had a comfortable moment in American because of her English. I get a tutor for her each term. She does not go His father died. He was raised Mormon and is gay. He always tries to be happy. . . . She does everything right and contributes nothing . . . She’s only 16 and feels fine . . . He’s a skate boarder and a very thoughtful young man.

I am a philosopher and do not teach the abstract metaphysical first principles. I do not teach the consequentialist and normative ethical theories. I do not teach the historical nature of ontological substance of the Empiricists nor the formal logic of necessary and sufficient conditions nor about justified true belief. Yet, in the yearlong required freshman inquiry class I teach metaphysics, epistemology, ontology, ethics, history of philosophy and logic. I teach out of my element. That is, I lose the comfort and security of my philosophy texts and take on plays; literature, art history texts and urban planning plot maps. What do I know of these texts? O.K., I have always lived in large cities, my mother inspired an interest in classical music and art history, I loved the play *Antigone* in 8th grade, yet my verbal S.A.T. score was well below my much higher achievement in math and science.

I don’t mind being out of my element when I forget the judgmental comments that I cannot possibly teach well if I am teaching out of my discipline. I don’t mind being uncomfortable since being in a comfort zone is not the nature of study in philosophy and I am used to being uncomfortable, that is, not to have all the answers. Answers are not as important as good questions when you teach critical thinking, oral communication, social responsibility and diversity/human experience.

It wasn't the years of adjunct work that I did nor the isolation I felt in my own department that spurred me to take on an interdisciplinary approach to philosophy. It was the Pragmatist Philosopher in me; the part that had done all that work on a Ph.D. on James Dewey's *Logic and Feminist Theory* that required me to teach philosophy in a different way. As a Feminist I challenge the traditional philosophical "search for certainty" and an admiration of first principles. As a Pragmatist I point out that the greatest fallacy in the history of philosophy is the lack of contextual analysis as well as the mistaking of means as ends in an analysis of knowledge. With these reflective cognitive skills being out of my element is not an unsolvable problem. It certainly is not a theoretical problem. It is simply a logistical problem. We humans deal with logistical problems everyday in our own disciplines. Logistics requires creativity not skill or training in a particular field of study. We get our creativity in pre-school. We just have to make sure we don't lose it in our adult work.

The team-taught course is entitled, *Knowledge, Art & Power: The Social Construction of Knowledge*. It critically analyzes and rejects both of the following claims: 1. Knowledge consists of eternal truths, 2. Knowledge is relativistic. In so doing, we focus on an understanding that knowledge serves selective interests; knowledge has a teleology (purpose)- i.e. power.

This is a yearlong course. We examine and analyze the relationships among and between knowledge, power and art. That means we must first understand *what counts as knowledge*. One way of understanding what counts as knowledge is to understand the way in which power is defined and the role politics plays in defining power. This exploration requires the input of a variety of readings from different fields of discipline since the relationships of knowledge, art & power occur throughout a variety of academic fields and all aspects of life. We read philosophical, political, literary (theatrical, fiction and non-fiction), scientific, artistic, social, historical and personal works to help us in our exploration.

We use a variety of written, oral and technological means of exploration and communication. Writing, in particular, is a key mode of inquiry and communication in this class. We use a variety of styles of writing, from persuasive arguments to personal narratives with the dual aim of improving our writing skills and exploring the overall questions: How is knowledge created? How do we change the hierarchy of knowledge that restricts some people's knowledge base? How is cultural and racial knowledge created? And, how does this kind of knowledge create values that are accepted and rejected?

We focus on cultural identity and try to identify the barriers of insider and outside knowledge by looking at historical relations with American Indians and native Hawaiians. We focus on the rise of natural philosophy in the 16-18th centuries to investigate the shift of power relations between the Catholic Church and the individual. We examine and analyze the relationships among knowledge, power and politics of art. We focus on historical events that show the relationships between art/politics and art/knowledge and the power relationships that define them. We deal with photographic art and the power of photojournalism and culture, racial photographic images and the history of jazz music, the Hollywood era of movie censorship, the Black List of artists, writers and actors, McCarthyism, and artistic labor and corporate patronage.

We will use a variety of written and visual means of exploration and communication. You produce a group photojournalism documentary on how knowledge is created in zones of transition in communities, and do a research papers on the relationship of art, knowledge & power in a historical or contemporary artistic movements of a variety of media.

There is also a strong emphasis in this course on collaborative learning. This means, in part, that everyone is engaged in a team process of analyzing various issues. In order to engage effectively in the collaborative learning process, we all have to be prepared and be in class.

We main focus is with the way in which both the method of knowledge creation and the content of knowledge are influenced. We do this by looking at two forms of power that Michel Foucault helps articulate:

1. Power Over – a hierarchical form of power that uses laws to control the development of knowledge as well as oppression (form of punishment) to reinforce a specific form of developed knowledge.
2. Power Relations - a form of power that is always already there, a web like formation in which knowledge is created and resisted in a web like fashion not a hierarchical fashion, a subversive form of knowledge creation in which techniques of repression not laws function as enforcement.

The medium of analysis is the students' own lives and my life. We analyze ourselves within the context of our lives as a construction of knowledge, that is, the ways we mediate our lives through notions of power, selective interests, social purpose and teleology.

The academic quarters:

I - *The Social Construction of **Cultural** Knowledge* – an analysis of how knowledge (everyday experience) is disturbed by cultural forces and consequently shifted into a hierarchical pattern of acceptance and/or rejection.

II - *The Social Construction of **Scientific** Knowledge* – an engagement with the Renaissance/Reformation/Counter Reformation rise of natural philosophy (today's science method) in order to place the movement of knowledge (experience) within an historical context created by both Power Over and Power Relations dynamics.

III - *The Social Construction of Knowledge **Artistically*** - an analysis of how knowledge is constructed through state support and lack of state support of the arts. The analysis of their lives in the first two terms takes on a different shape as the students construct a visual landscape through photography and prose within the documentary genre of James Agee and Walker Evans, *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*.

To be continued:

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Essay 1: A reflection of my participation in the STRT process:

The team is not cohesive although the consistency of some members builds my trust of them. I can say what my project is and what I am trying to do, to those few. They get the issues I am dealing with even if they are not philosophers. I seek their help because they are not philosophers. I do not need philosophy help. That I can handle. They offer me ways of speaking and writing that are outside of the traditional academic philosophical manner that I was trained to do, that I do fairly well and that I am used to. I am not comfortable with that style anymore and they give me permission to *not fit*.

I am self-absorbed in my thoughts and projects most of the time. The STRT team meetings remind me that there are colleagues out there and that they are sometimes rather interesting. I may not understand their projects and wonder why they are doing them, but these are just the same reflections I have of my own work. That I can say this of others reminds me that I *fit*.

I'd rather be outside if it's sunny or preparing for class or agonizing over the lack of time I have to do the writing I offered to the team. Yet, the team meeting gives me permission to focus on what I can do rather what I am not doing. They tell me what voices they have used to write with, voices that maintain their integrity while extending the bounds of the permissible. And they give me permission to *not fit*.

I am a good teacher. I love to teach. I love being with my students for the 3-4 hours a week we are together. I offer them this time to be self indulgent, to not think about their jobs or their other classes, to allow them to enjoy the time of self-reflection.

And, I support them when they complain that their brains hurt from thinking philosophically. The team supports me. My ideas *fit*.