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Special Summer Teaching Toolbox

Teach like a Punk

by Andreas Broscheid

When we had to suddenly switch to online teaching in March, I was reminded of the punk movement that got started when I was just a wee lad and has continued strong as I have become a not-so-wee lad. Musically, Denise Mercedes, the guitarist of the Stimulators, described the existential punk predicament as follows: ["I don't know what I'm doing, but I'm going to pick up a guitar and here I go."](#) Non-musically, this described precisely how I felt about moving my teaching online last spring. (In fact, it describes how I feel about teaching in general, as somebody whose graduate studies did not include any more teaching instruction than being assigned summer courses to teach on my own.)

I think there are a number of things we can learn from punk about our teaching, online and off-line, as we think about our upcoming fall classes: simplicity, passion, the Do-It-Yourself ethos, and the questioning of commonly-accepted rules that lead to injustice. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, there is a whole academic literature on punk—and on punk as an approach to academic teaching. In the openly available [Punkademics](#) (pdf) volume, Estrella Torrez, inspired by her own punk past as well as Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, talks about education as "a fundamentally empowering, liberating, and healing cycle of reciprocity between teacher and learner" (2012, 133). Her approach to teaching aspires towards the already noted DIY ethos that eschews consumerism and commodified materialist lifestyle; opposition to conformity; opposition to teacher-learner hierarchies; "equity, rebellion, critique, self-examination, solidarity, community, love, anger, and collaboration" (136). I use the word "aspire" here, as Torrez also emphasizes the willingness to dare—and to fail (connecting nicely to other arguments about [learning through failure](#)).

Heady stuff. What does it mean practically? To me, it suggests the following:

Do It Yourself (have I mentioned this before?): Avoid excessive technological sophistication and instead focus on how we can learn with the tools that we know and feel comfortable using. [Three technological tools may well be one too many.](#)

Imperfection: The important thing is that what we do works and that it's important. And, if not, we'll have to learn how to make it work and important the next time around. In other words, do not edit your "ums" and "ahs" from your online lectures; don't sweat it if you cannot get the Zoom breakout rooms to work right away...or at all; say, "screw it, this didn't work" and come up with another way to learn on the spot.

Interrogate commodification: If possible, [use open materials](#), whether they are open textbooks or materials otherwise available on the open web. But also, and maybe more importantly, make the [use, commodification, and manipulation](#) of ourselves online a theme with students. What do we

permit Google, Facebook, etc. to do with us as commodities and advertisement targets?

Teaching for social justice: Our classes shouldn't be competitions for who is better and who is worse. They should be communities in which we learn from each other and in which we support each other according to our needs. At the very minimum, this means that we have to remove hurdles to learning based on disability, socio-economic status, vulnerability to micro- and macro-aggressions, type of pre-college preparation, access to WiFi, mastery of punctuation rules, and the like. But, more ambitiously, our teaching should be what [bell hooks](#) calls “a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization” (2). This is an ambitious goal, especially for somebody like me—a white guy working at a predominantly white institution—but it can be translated into [specific steps that we can take](#), as well as [knowledge](#) and [skills](#) that we can learn.

Undermine teacher-learner hierarchies: Of course, we're the subject-matter experts, but the students are the ones who learn. We'll have to work together: What are students' interests in the topic? What is important for them? How can they shape the curriculum, the course structure, the goals, the activities, the assignments? (I know, this is basically [Learner-Centered Teaching](#), right?)

Let there be drama: Learning is [not only cognitive but connected to emotions](#)—we know that. Punk emphasizes emotional transparency, particularly the expression of passion and anger. Passion and anger are also central, I think, for students to understand why something that they've possibly never thought about is important. And students need to learn to express what they are passionate about, what angers them. Referring back to my note about social justice, it's worth noting that the [suppression of anger as part of an imposed civility requirement](#) can be unjust, for example [as we discuss racist discrimination](#). As an instructor, I have to learn how to respond to emotion and anger in the classroom, help channel it into directions that lead to learning, and protect vulnerable students.

Community, love, care: I find it interesting that Torrez lists community and love, and I've added care as a third that I think cannot be separated from the other two and makes them work in education. Particularly [in the current situation](#), as we interact at a distance, we have to [devise strategies to care for students in our classes](#), to build community, and to make sure they experience the loving support that they need in order to learn in scary times. And, as a male prof, I have to make sure to take on the care work that is often, and without recognition, dumped on faculty with less power—often female faculty and/or faculty of color, often in insecure positions.

Self-examination and critique: As a tenured faculty member in a 12-month position, I have quite a bit of institutional stature and privilege. Critiquing injustice has to include a self-examination of my role in it and how I can work to move higher education towards justice. More generally, this is connected to using [meta-cognition](#), self-assessment, reflection in my own work, but also in my work with students: How can they use self-examination to learn? How can they use reflection to deal with life under COVID-19 and in times of anti-racist social unrest, in a hostile political situation that drifts into authoritarianism? What are their experiences, and how do they matter?

Accept failure: One thing I love about Torrez's essay is that she includes a narrative of how she fails

in implementing punk “principles” in one of her classes. This obviously connects to other recent (and not-so recent) conversations in higher education (see, for example, the [failure CV](#)). But the approach is a bit more radical than [approaches that see failure as opportunities to learn](#): We fail. We can expect to do so. Things often don’t work out. So be ready to get up and try again. I think we can’t hear this often enough these days: We are not set up to succeed in our work, in the current situation. In fact, we’re set up to get sick. And we have to pick up our pieces and do what we gotta do. Or not.

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