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SHERYL J. LIEB

EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY AS ATTITUDE AND PEDAGOGY FOR SELF AND STUDENT LIBERATION

Grounding myself in existential philosophy, I speak to an existential pedagogy of resistance in which the individual educator might reclaim her subjectivity and agency in these neoliberal times. Such a pedagogy, teaching *as* and *for* resistance, emerges from an intentionally proactive manifestation of the “existential attitude” (Solomon, 2005, p. 1), a consciously internalized realization of one’s own personhood amidst the oppressive realities of a dehumanizing educational system. Not to be construed as a simplistic notion of self-imposed positive thinking strategies, nor as a light-bulb moment of freedom in which an automatic sense of power over others or over the present realities of neoliberal oppression is suddenly revealed, “The existential attitude begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world that she cannot accept” (Solomon, 2005, p. xi). In this view, the existential attitude speaks to a critical psychological/philosophical confrontation with oneself; an existential self-reckoning through which the educator confronts her situation of disorientation and dehumanization and, finding it unacceptable, decides what she can and cannot do to change the present reality. It is from this perspective, I suggest, that the individual educator might *choose*, in her heightened state of “wide-awakeness” (Greene, 1973, p. 162), to resist neoliberal policies and practices aimed at repressing teacher subjectivity and academic freedom. As such, the educator, as resistor, might choose to enact teaching and relationship-building strategies in the K-12 classroom that more authentically integrate personal and pedagogical values grounded in individual freedom, self-expression, interactive dialogue, and intellectual creativity. Ultimately, while the existential attitude serves as a strong motivator for choosing to resist oppressive educational policies and practices, it also ensures that the teacher remains aware that her best efforts do not necessarily guarantee the freedom she seeks.

What does it mean to be authentic, personally and pedagogically, in the *real world* of the public school classroom? For me, to be an authentic teacher is to validate human subjectivity by affirming personhood – for myself and for my students as unique individuals – and by modeling teaching and learning as a praxis of freedom, engaging curriculum as “complicated conversation, as communication informed by academic knowledge” (Pinar, 2012, p. xiii) brought to life by the presence and participation of the members of the classroom community. Certainly, this image of personal and pedagogical authenticity represents an ideal, and hard questions remain regarding any teacher’s ability to actualize this kind of scenario in a real world situation. For instance, in today’s standardized, test-driven public school classroom, is it reasonable to think that the teacher can purposefully situate personhood and intellectual freedom at the core of her pedagogical practice, demonstrating and living these ideals as she interacts with her students? Furthermore, can we claim that this kind of pedagogical practice, by itself, represents a viable and effective form of resistance to the neoliberal agenda? Pinar (2012) asserted that it is both possible and

necessary for teachers, in their classroom spaces, to resist the “fascist regime” (p. 10) of neoliberal education. Not an easy task. Pinar has suggested that teachers can choose to implement pedagogical strategies of resistance - underscored by principles of individual and academic freedom - that are personally doable by evaluating their particular situations and then making choices about how to move forward.

Without reclaiming academic – intellectual – freedom teachers cannot teach.... Intransigent, we teachers can quietly continue to teach, intellectually engaging our students in academically informed conversation concerning the key concepts of past and present. Engaging in such complicated conversation constitutes a curriculum in which academic knowledge, subjectivity, and society become reciprocally reconstructed. (Pinar, 2012, pp. 10-11)

To reiterate, for the individual teacher to consciously choose a pedagogy of personhood and intellectual freedom in our current educational climate speaks to an existential attitude of confrontation with the unacceptability of working in a space of disorientation and dehumanization. From the existential perspective, once a situation is deemed unacceptable, the necessity of moving through or beyond it becomes paramount. Consequently, the move from disorientation and acquiescence toward subjective clarity and intentional resistance is a necessary choice for today’s educator. “The existential attitude is not universal, and existential philosophy is not a truth about the human condition. As Camus says, for many of us it is simply necessary” (Solomon, 2005, p. xiv). The existential attitude is necessary because it represents the educator’s choice of personhood over objectification, her choice of humanistic pedagogical values over educational values grounded in standardization and objectification. The choice to act, in itself, affirms the educator as a subject – in contrast to experiencing oneself as a manipulated object - in the neoliberal educational realm. Such self-empowered choosing, I submit, is what makes resistance – selected acts of intransigence - possible in the classroom. In other, more extreme cases such as my own, choosing might even lead to defection from the oppressive arena of contemporary K-12 education.

In the portrait that follows, I represent my stance against neoliberal education as a resistor *within* and defector *from* the K-12 public school system where I had worked as a teacher/librarian for thirteen years. Since my defection from that system, I became a doctoral student and instructor (Foundations of Education) of undergraduate students preparing to be future teachers, continuing to position myself as a resistor by exposing my students to critical and philosophical forms of pedagogy that could be adapted to their own evolving teaching philosophies and future pedagogical practices. Using excerpts from a semester’s worth of autobiographical field notes (spring 2013), I offer a portrait of pedagogical resistance against neoliberalism’s prescriptive teaching model whereby I emphasize existential themes of freedom, subjectivity, choice, action, and responsibility within a seminar-style, classroom setting. My purpose has consistently been to encourage students to develop their individual capacities for self-inquiry, personal expression (verbal and written), interactive dialogue, philosophical thinking, and relationship building. Such traits, I submit, are not emphasized in the current, standardized model of public school education in which information is packaged, and curriculum is instrumentally designed around selected goals and objectives requiring concrete answers to be applied to standardized tests. Neoliberal education’s data-based pedagogical model - designed around rote teaching strategies, memorization of predetermined information, and the use of technology as a primary teaching/learning/assessment/testing tool - does not require or engage individual subjectivity, intellectual curiosity, or the dynamics of interactive dialogue that constitute curriculum as a human conversation.

Interestingly, a pedagogical paradox emerges from the contrast between an existential view of education and the neoliberal view. As such, a warning to the reader: existential freedom can be a disconcerting, anxiety-producing experience for the unsuspecting student who has been conditioned to the standardizing climate of K-12 education. In discussions with my students, a large number of them have revealed that they are more at home with a concrete notion of education because that is what they experienced throughout their years of K-12 schooling. In other words, the normative educational process for these students has typically and consistently encompassed a dependence on rubrics, assessments, tests, right/wrong answers, and concrete grading systems. As such, the security and precision of academic

concreteness is frequently preferred over the open-ended, abstract possibilities of academic freedom because the notion of possibility, in itself, speaks to uncertainty and requires an alternative, imaginative way of thinking. Existential and academic freedom also require students' willingness to engage themselves and the world in more profound ways; in effect, to risk engaging multiple points of view that might cause them to question the familiarity and security of their own, long-held assumptions about education, society, and life itself. Consequently, opening students' minds to their own possibilities of existential freedom, as unique individuals and as future teachers, has proven to be a fundamental challenge, one that actually reinforces my pedagogy of resistance *against* oppressive neoliberal reforms and *for* the academic freedom of its unwitting student victims.

“And yet, as will be argued in this book, a teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own.” (Greene, 1988, p. 14)

I sit down at the table and use my written prompts to get dialogue started. I feel the weight on my shoulders/on my spirit to make the room come alive, to wake up these students' minds with the light of an idea or an emotion that will open the floodgates of conversation. A few comments here, a few there, like slow, unpredictable drips of water from a leaky faucet. I am still talking a lot, but I am determined to motivate a dialogue. I ask more pointed questions – aiming arrows of thought at these student targets – arrows dipped in controversial topics like social class, racism, sexism, stereotypes, bullying, religion, and ethnicity, and so forth. I want to pierce them with these arrows to stun them into consciousness, to awaken thought and curiosity, to stimulate their imaginations, their anger, their memories, their pain, their hopes, and their dreams.

When we talk about the reading on School Wounds, I point my targeted questions, my arrows, toward distinct prompts of school-based shame, prejudice, bullying experiences, dualities of smart vs. dumb, etc. to inspire or maybe prick at a personal memory or experience. An African-American girl talks about being assumed as dumb in predominantly white schools. Another female student talks about a teacher who killed her love for learning by insisting that all assignments be completed as illustrations, a mode of expression with which she felt uncomfortable. Another student commented that a teacher had told her she was stupid. Similar stories came to light. But not everyone spoke, not just yet, not this second class of the semester. Regardless, I began to feel redemption in that we broke the silence that I would have interpreted as disinterest, non-engagement, boredom, intimidation. And that kind of silence, for me, would have meant a defeat, a sense of failure. This kind of silence is not the calm of reflective silence, but rather the silence of powerlessness, of disconnection, of futility. (Lieb, 2013, excerpt from Class 2 field notes)

“How can one act on one's commitment and at once set others free to be? This seems to us to be one of the crucial questions confronting the self-conscious teacher.” (Greene, 1973, Preface, para 5)

I enter the doorway of my classroom. Our “seminar square” has been set up. I announce my friendly “hello” and chatter about the last batch of student papers recently graded and what we're going to do in class today. I continue to speak, seeking connection with my students. Why do I always feel that I have to fill the empty spaces with my voice? Seeking their approval? Trying to be engaging? Trying to initiate dialogue? All of the above. I look at my notes: comments about another batch of papers written on an assigned reading, I offer, “Your papers are quite good – actually full of conviction, so why don't you speak your thoughts aloud in class?” No response.

I recall a philosophy of listening course in which doctoral students explored philosophical interpretations and dimensions of human listening. To whom or what am I listening in this situation? Students' voices? More often, listening to their silences. Listening to my own voice, both the internal chatter and the external conversation. I purposefully invite my students to engage in meaningful classroom dialogue, to share opinions, and to be open to diverse points of view. I think to myself that an education course such as this – predicated on critical pedagogy, contemporary social justice issues, and philosophy of education – should naturally provoke passionate ideas and engaged discourse. With a touch of desperation and a large dose of humor, I declare to the group, “Liberate yourselves!” They smile, laugh, and reinforce my

hope of inspiring deeper efforts at personal reflection, open communication, and a realized sense of personal connection to this educational community.

Still, I ask myself if this is too much, too controversial a practice of socio-cultural critique and self-examination? Might I crush the teaching aspirations of these future educators? I openly voice this fear to my class, further explaining that while we intend to critique many aspects of the institution of education, hopes and possibilities for change are available. Hope and possibility can be their tools of choice as they consider why and how they will teach. I ask my students if I make them uncomfortable with my forthrightness. They answer no. One young woman even pronounces to the class that she is amazed that I (as instructor) model the principles of which I speak. Grateful for the affirmation, I reiterate that the purpose of this class is to communicate freely and respectfully, think critically and philosophically, explore personal and social possibilities, ultimately creating a community of togetherness. (Lieb, 2013, excerpt from Class 5 field notes)

“After all, when one becomes self-conscious, one is present as a person in any situation; the mechanisms of denial and detachment do not work.” (Greene, 1973, p. 5)

I consciously and unconsciously hold my humanness in full view for my students to see and experience --- that I am not some dispassionate authoritarian providing concepts for their information needs. I am a human being who likes to teach, and I can only accomplish this goal in relationship to them. We must break the barriers to our humanity. They [the students] must make contact with their inner selves and stop hiding behind socially sanctioned images. We talk about these issues all the time, but at some point, the talk must be backed up with actions. Therefore, in my class, the most significant action my students can take is to dialogue with integrity and respect, ask real questions, and be willing to entertain a variety of perspectives that feel threatening.

My students are conflicted between what they are being taught traditionally in their education classes and the focus we take on education in ELC 381. They’re caught in a web of opposing/yet intersecting strands: those of institutional compliance counterbalanced by philosophical/psychological resistance. I keep telling them that they can infuse the prescriptive model with an existential teaching practice. Do I really believe this? Yes, as an independent classroom teacher – not easily, but possible. And this individual must be willing to confront and take a stand, without neglecting what is required. (Lieb, 2013, excerpt from Class 17 field notes)

“It is not easy to take one’s authentic stance, to choose oneself as personally responsible.” (Greene, 1973, p. 5)

I break the class up into groups of three and give them guide sheets to prompt discussion. I understand the students like small groups because they find it easier to open up and share ideas. That’s what they say. I go around to each group to listen, answer questions, and provide comments. This is a more difficult reading: “The Hidden Curriculum.” ... I suggest that they talk about what they wrote in their papers. I tell them that I know this is hard. Nevertheless, we need to keep the discussion going, share ideas, and perhaps make some breakthroughs through our attempts to analyze and create meaning. In an effort to better clarify the theme of the chapter, I read a particular passage. This strategy is helpful, but still does not provoke independent thinking. When these students think about curriculum, they are thinking of specific, isolated subjects that they associate with homework and testing.

I continue to perch on the white table, talking at them. At them. They are still so reticent to speak. I feel frustrated, but in a benign way. I am not angry, but I like to confront a dilemma, so I ask them why they are so hesitant to speak up? No sounds emanate from these inscrutable faces. I continue to view them as products of the system currently under discussion. My students (with three notable exceptions) could have fallen off the assembly line of education. Good, obedient products shaped into the standardized models of future teachers. Systematically activated as opposed to self-activating. Push the right buttons, and turn on their programmed modes of operation – they will talk. Concrete and one-dimensional, they emerge from the halls of public schooling as non-agentic, human reproductions who will perpetuate the mechanistic

standards of 21st century education: compliant and inauthentic to the enterprise of human education as the existential force of individual, human development and the cultures we, as human beings, create and perpetuate.

So, I want to slice through this barrier of silence and fear. I want to continue to poke at them, to locate an embodied, visceral place of feeling and self-consciousness. I tell them that their papers demonstrate thoughtfulness and powerful opinions, so why can't or don't they express this in class? No sounds – faces still mostly expressionless. Numbness? Fear? What? Do they just not understand? One of the males (chronically lax about submitting assignments) says that rather than talk so much, he wants to give others a chance to speak; that he can be enlightened by what others have to say. As he spews these words, I am thinking to myself, "What bullshit!" Instead, I say, prefacing my statement with care and respect: "I have to call you on what you just said as an excuse (was going to say cop-out, but I caught myself) because no one has been talking! So, from whom are you going to learn?" He chuckled and responded that I "got him" there. An honest, human response.

Another student stays after class. He connects on something I said about liking embodied classroom environments, liking stimulating, intellectual conversations over coffee or wine. He liked talking with me, I think, telling me how he and his friends were discussing their ideas about free will and determinism, smoking cigarettes, and getting involved in it all. Another philosopher, I hope. (Lieb, 2013, excerpt from Class 5 field notes)

“Teachers can express intransigence to this fascist regime by expressing loyalty to the profession, by refusing to teach to the test, by insisting that students engage with ideas and facts critically and with passion through solitary study and classroom deliberation.” (Pinar, 2012, p. 10)

I am still standing in the hallway, wishing them well and a good summer as they go. Several of the students stop and give me hugs. I really like this. We have connected on some level. I remind myself that it is in the moment of connection that a spark might be ignited, a relationship created, an intellectual mutuality forged, or simply the acknowledgment of human bonding. Despite my concerns about their difficulties in discussions, I feel that we have connected; that I have established some kind of teaching purpose that they understand. And I have done it through recognizing them as individuals, as much as I could in two classes per week and through commentaries in twice weekly Response papers. I can wonder what they think of me, and in this moment, I am feeling pretty good. (Lieb, 2013, excerpt from Class 28 field notes)

Is feeling good — in the moment and possibly beyond that moment — sufficient justification for an educator's continuing efforts to resist the oppressive reality of the neoliberal educational agenda? Is there a fundamentally existential purpose and meaningfulness that underscores an educator's feeling good in this way? Overall, does existentialism, with its primary focus on individual freedom and subjectivity, provide a viable context for educator resistance, as well as a viable path toward possibilities of educator liberation in these neoliberal times? I am suggesting that we can answer these questions, necessarily focused on the existential stance of the individual educator, with an unqualified “yes.” While it is true that we can join political movements and support politicians who claim to represent human rights and academic freedom, we yet remain caught up in the swell of “the crowd” mentality (Kierkegaard, in Solomon, 2005, p. 32). Existentialism asks us to call upon ourselves, as uniquely constituted individuals, to effect change where, when, and how we can. On this basis, once the educator has achieved the acute consciousness of the existential attitude - the critical consciousness necessary to potentially change one's situation of unfreedom - she is existentially compelled to choose; that is, to remain in a state of passive victimhood or to choose acts of resistance in whatever ways possible within her particular situation. Moreover, existentialism reminds us that *not choosing* is also a choice. To be very clear, and to not be perceived as glib or simplistic, I want to reiterate that the freedom to choose does not guarantee happiness, success, or peace as promised results of the educator's good efforts to resist neoliberal educational policies and practices. Rather, choosing affirms an inner liberation, the subjectivity of personhood, and the educator's commitment to freedom.

In the final analysis, I want to say that the individual educator very much matters today; that her project of personhood and pedagogical freedom, enacted in the classroom and elsewhere, is worth pursuing because it constitutes a real and intentional project of resistance to neoliberal ideology. Therefore, as we each contemplate our understandings of education's purpose and meaning, we also need to contemplate our reasons for choosing to be scholars and educators in this day and time. If education represents an existential choice for the person who teaches, then I suggest that her pedagogical project deserves reclaiming as a humanitarian project in which validation of educator personhood sits at the core. On this basis, I suggest that we must regularly contemplate, decide, and take action as to how we might resist and remain resilient in order to recover our existential and educational selves.

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AFFILIATIONS

Sheryl Lieb received her Ph.D. in Educational Studies/Concentration in Cultural Studies (2015) from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Within a decidedly interdisciplinary focus, she has carved out a scholarly niche in the areas of cultural studies, philosophy of education, existential studies, human sustainability, and narrative forms of research and writing. Currently, as an independent scholar in pursuit of a permanent teaching position in higher education, Lieb works as a freelance academic content/copy editor of dissertations and dissertation proposals.