The Teacher-Student: What Schools Need but Do Not Have

In Chapter two of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Paulo Freire comes up with an important idea that he believes could revolutionize the relationship between students and teachers. Freire writes that, “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 type of teacher that Freire is speaking of is the type of teacher who not only “listens” to students, but s/he is the type of teacher who actually changes how s/he teaches because of an ongoing dialogue with his/her students. In my experience, and the experience of many students who give advice to teachers in Kathleen Kushman’s *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students*, this sort of teacher almost never exists. However, when you find him or her, then you want to stay in their class forever, because that is truly when you begin to learn material in a real and true sense. Despite their rarity, we, as a culture, need to make sure that “teacher-students” exist to teach their “student-teachers,” because, without them, students will only learn empty facts, stripped of all meaning (Freire). While some may disagree with my claim, believing it is enough to learn facts from an engaging teacher, I believe that true education requires teachers who follow through on a democratic impulse (often through using real life events to teach) to create a critical consciousness of the world in their students.

Some might say that I am exaggerating my claim. After all, there are many fine teachers who actually reach and teach their students in a traditional way—expressing primarily facts. I
know that this can be true, and I have experienced it myself. In the 8th grade, I was taught be a Mr. E. Mr. E spent most of his time lecturing, and he was a riveting lecturer. I learned a great deal of facts from Mr. E. I learned the words to the preamble to the constitution (“We the people, in order to form a more perfect union”); I learned who led the invasion at Normandy (General Dwight D. Eisenhower); and I even learned that the Viet Nam war sparked huge protests in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

However, what I didn’t really learn to do was to think about history in a critical way. I learned facts, but I never did anything but store them. I was a student in what Paulo Freire calls the banking system. Freire claims that in the banking system “students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat . . . the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing deposits.” I think my inability to think critically about Mr. E’s wonderful lectures stems from the fact that I only saw what I was learning as “facts” that I would have to use in my next test. The facts were interesting, but they were just facts.

So ultimately, Mr. E., and the many other Mr. E’s I’ve had as teachers, failed me. They taught me facts, but they didn’t give me any idea of what to do with those facts. Even more distressing though, they didn’t even bother to listen much to what I had to say about those facts. However, that doesn’t have to be the case.

In her book, *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students*, Kathleen Cushman allows students to tell teachers, current and prospective, what they want from teachers—what will help them learn. At the beginning of Chapter 10, Kushman writes, Especially for teenagers, school doesn’t always provide the best setting for learning. At a time when adolescents want to try their wings, sitting in a classroom can feel frustratingly irrelevant and juvenile. They may not see the
point of subjects they must take or the importance of habits like punctuality and correct language. To get ideas about their own interests and potential, they often need inspiration from not just academic teachers but other adults doing related work. (175)

Clearly, students need to feel that school is relevant, and clearly one of the ways to do that is to have experiences outside of school. To have these sorts of opportunities to learn outside of school, students need to not only be allowed to articulate their wants (such as to do internships, which Kushman claims many high school students are interested in), but they need teachers who are humble enough to listen to them and make sure that they can pursue their interests.

One teacher who gave me this sort of freedom was my Journalism teacher in high school, Mr. Lake. Mr. Lake ran our Newspaper, *the Ashland High School Newspaper*” in the most casual and democratic way possible. He delegated authority to the editors and even to writers like me, and, most interesting of all; he had us “pitch” our story ideas on Monday for our bi-weekly paper.

These pitch sessions could become heated, even confrontational—unless of course you had a killer idea that people were willing to accept almost immediately. In my two years of pitching, I only had one idea that was immediately accepted: writing a story on migrant pear workers in my home area of Oregon, The Rogue Valley. After the near unanimous approval of my story by the editor and my teacher, I was sent out, with a local Spanish teacher as translator, to do some interviewing and researching. I had no idea how much I was going to learn by doing this one story.

As a naïve, callow 17 year old, I thought I knew everything, but I certainly didn’t know that five miles from my comfortable house there were about eight Mexican emigrants living in a
bunk house that was illuminated by one lone light bulb. I didn’t know, as I came to learn, that these men worked 12 hours a day doing brutally demanding physical labor—earning the then agricultural minimum wage of $1.25 an hour. In short, I learned that my perfect, secure world was an aberration of sorts. Truly, it was a lot different from the world of these men who talked to me in quiet rapid Spanish that I could (despite three years of Spanish) barely make out.

However, the biggest deal wasn’t what I learned, but what I did with what I learned. I sat down and wrote a 2000 word feature article, complete with pictures of the bunkhouse where the workers stayed, that showed—as much as I was able—the plight of these hard-working men. For the first time in my life, I think that writing meant more to me than doing an assignment; I really wanted to write something that would do something in the world. I wanted my peers to understand that there were people working just a few miles from the school who were invisible to us, and that invisibility was both wrong and dangerous.

After writing the article, seeing it get picked up by the local paper, and feeling what I now realize was a foolish sense of pride (after all I just wrote an article—I didn’t change much), I asked Mr. Lake what he thought of the article. He said that he was happy that I did it, and that I hoped I learned a bit about what “real journalism” was all about.

Now in my 13th year of teaching, I marvel at Mr. Lake’s wisdom. He provided us a place to be student-teachers (our pitch sessions), and he allowed me, as Cushman counsels, to make a connection to the outside world with my work in school. I do not think that writing, before or since, has meant as much to me as that 2000 word feature.

Unlike Mr. E., Mr. Lake helped me realize the purpose and point of my writing by allowing me to see the world anew through dialogue with the migrant Mexican workers I interviewed (Freire). And my observations, gleaned from the writing I did, helped me see and
report upon “previously inconspicuous phenomena:” the working conditions of migrant pear pickers. My consciousness had expanded, in the Freirean sense, and my expanded consciousness had even led me, at least for a moment, to see my tidy world of Ashland, Oregon as a “historical reality susceptible of transformation” (Freire). I could see that things in Ashland, Oregon were not perfect, fair, and equitable, and, because of this realization, I wanted to do something to try and change the situation. My writing was my attempt to try and share my changed perception with the wider world—to make writing do something in the wider word.

This sort of real world learning is the learning that rarely happens in school. At best we often get classes taught by Mr. E. We are entertained and informed, but we are never changed. Mr. Lake’s approach to teaching journalism actually changed me, and allowed me to share that change with others. If we want to have true education, education that is transformative and real, then we need more Mr. Lakes and fewer Mr. Es. We need to create an education system that fosters dialogue, democracy, and student action in the wider world. We need to stop creating people who are simply “teachers” and allow for the creation of “teacher-students” and “student-teachers” (Freire).