

# The Critical Classroom

By Project South

If we want transformative classrooms to help movement-building to resist the corporate university, how shall we approach this work as educators? Revolutionary theory is a tool for transformation, but to make it mass-based, popular education is necessary.

People can come to analysis and theory through different paths. Some come through studying social and political theory in the academy. Others come through the social struggle itself and the need to have the wisdom of past generations. The existing body of theory and the reflection process are located in the particularity of the group's experience. The people themselves are developing their collective analysis and leadership. They make the change.

In locating intellectual and political practice in the university setting, the critical classroom is a necessary site of struggle. In this context, there is no such thing as the neutral classroom or objective professor. This is an important point. Students and teachers are conditioned to think that the texts, the writers, the experts are "objective and unbiased." Those of us with an oppositional viewpoint are treated as "subjective and biased." Many decades of objective knowledge have been critiqued in the sciences and social sciences. But this way of thinking still persists.

Those involved in transforming the curriculum understood that knowledge is situated. Power, interests, and particularity structure our understanding of the world. For example, the English canon was decided by an elite group of white men at Ivy League institutions.

The critical classroom is a space where activists, scholars, and students co-create knowledge for working toward social transformation. It is also a space where we draw upon the knowledge and histories of communities in struggle. The voices of those in struggle do matter. For example, we would teach

Mumia Abu Jamal in a criminal justice course, or Ida Wells-Barnett in a course on black history or women's history. But the point is how this knowledge and these ideas are used, not just that they are used. Are they being used to challenge traditional assumptions as an oppositional force? Are they being used to center discussion and analysis around movement-building?

Relationship-building between scholars and students and the broader community is also essential for scholar activists. Each organization has its own mission and purpose, and professors sending their students into the community need to understand each organization's goals.

Today, the language of the university speaks about community engagement, service learning, and community-university partnerships, i.e., the public university. This language and the practice that informs it are profoundly and intentionally flawed. This is driven by a history of universities exploiting historically marginalized communities through both, research "on" these communities and by geoexpansionism into these communities.

In the service learning model in its most vulgar form, professors can get by without having a relationship with the communities where their students are supposedly "helping," though some faculty do bring in some analysis of why these communities are in need.

But faculty should not be deluded that by doing this alone these communities will be transformed. At its best, this can contribute to critical consciousness-raising.

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# The Corporate University

The university is a microcosm of the larger society. The domination of corporate interests in the larger society and global economy is expressed in today's corporate university. While there has always been an interrelationship between corporations and the university, under current conditions there is a weakening of the idea that the university is a space independent of the economy and that university actors (faculty, administrators, boards of trustees, etc.) are autonomous. Some of the main features of today's corporate university are the merger of corporate interests with intellectual production in the university—making intellectual production property that corporations can appropriate and use to make profits. We see this in corporate funding of laboratory research, especially in the sciences, e.g., the biotech and pharmaceutical industries. In the social sciences and humanities they are considering claiming ownership and copyright of all written materials produced. Government officials and corporate representatives often sit on boards of trustees to consolidate this relationship. Fewer and fewer progressive foundations today even fund liberal scholarship.

The corporate university, like its business counterpart, embodies a business model of rigid hierarchy and centralization, so-called cost-effective pro-

gramming, and paying for services. This erodes the jobs, wages, and working conditions of university workers—from faculty to janitors. For faculty, this means fewer full-time tenure track

expected to do more and more work with less and less support. Support staff, from administrative staff to electricians and janitors, also face speed-up—doing more with less. Unions on campuses are fighting for their survival and fewer university workers in any job are unionized.

In some universities, there are preferential purchasing agreements between the university and the state prison system to buy equipment and supplies made by prison workers, predominantly men of color. The prison industrial complex meets the university.<sup>3</sup>

The corporate university increasingly denies access to students by multiple means possible. Soaring tuition costs and higher and higher admission criteria are the most obvious means. Once students are there, they find that the quality of the educational experience is deteriorating, especially for students of color and poor and working-class students. Whether students graduate or not, they are shouldering huge debt with high interest and a short time to pay it off.

■

## Endnotes

1. American Association of University Professors, "Employment Status of All Faculty." *Faculty Matters* 1:1. Washington D.C. (Fall 2005).
2. Johnson, B. *Steal this University: The Rise of the Corporate University and the Academic Labor Market* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
3. Paulsen, N. "Stop Contracting with MINNCOR," *Minnesota Daily*, (October 31, 2005).

The American Association of University Professors reports that the percent of full-time tenured faculty has fallen from about 37 percent in 1975 to 24 percent in 2003.

Overall, tenure-track faculty have dropped substantially, from 57 percent in 1975 to 35 percent in 2003. In contrast, the percent of full-time, non-tenure-track faculty has increased from 13 percent in 1975, to 19 percent in 2003, while the percent of part-time faculty has gone from 30 percent in 1975, to 46 percent in 2003.

This makes for a total percent of contingent faculty at 43 percent in 1975 and at 65 percent in 2003. Clearly, more than half of all faculty today are in the contingent category.<sup>1</sup>

positions and extensive use of graduate assistants and contingent faculty (adjuncts, part-time instructors, year-to-year appointments). These contingent faculty have no job security, few if any benefits, and lower wages. All faculty face larger classes with less support.<sup>2</sup>

Research universities look to faculty grants that need to be bigger with larger overheads to fund the university. Faculty who fail to do these things often do not get tenure to begin with; and if they have tenure, they are subject to post-tenure review with criticism and static salaries. This is academic speedup with no support—we are



If we don't struggle around the difficult and messy relationships between the academy and the community, we cannot build a movement that scholar activists are a part of. This cannot happen unless scholar activists go into spaces that are community and movement-building and make the commitment to listen first, to recognize and accept the leadership of the community, and to be there for the long haul.

A lot of the internalized oppression among historically marginalized communities plays out as deference to "experts." The most accessible model we have is to be like the oppressor. Scholars have to resist this trap and its privileges of class, race, nationality, and gender.

### Liberatory Learning and Teaching

We offer a theory and practice of liberatory learning and teaching, which is democratic and rooted in the ongoing struggle. It is based on shared power and equality and the transformation of society and the world. The philosophical and theoretical underpinnings are dialectical and historical materialism. Theory and practice are united in the production of knowledge and other forms of consciousness grounded in people's lived experience and the organization of

social life to meet human needs. History is the unfolding of human agency, especially of those most marginalized, to create another world.

This historic moment of renewed social struggle compels us to re-center our curricula, syllabi, and pedagogies around movement-building. This means building community change beyond service learning. Relationships and partnerships between scholar activists and grassroots activists and organizations must be nurtured over the long haul. They will be grounded in trust and shared power and resources. Indigenous knowledge and community-based knowledge will exist in a catalytic relationship with scholar-based knowledge—with keen attention to language, framing, presuppositions, discourse, and the matrix of power of current understanding. The dynamics of the classroom must generate student agency. Facilitation and engagement, peer evaluation, lived experience, and a dialogical teacher-learner/learner-teacher process will be the reality. ■

*This article is excerpted from the Project South Critical Classroom Toolkit, which is available for purchase at [www.projectsouth.org/pages/store.htm](http://www.projectsouth.org/pages/store.htm).*

*Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide is a leadership development organization based in the Southern United States.*

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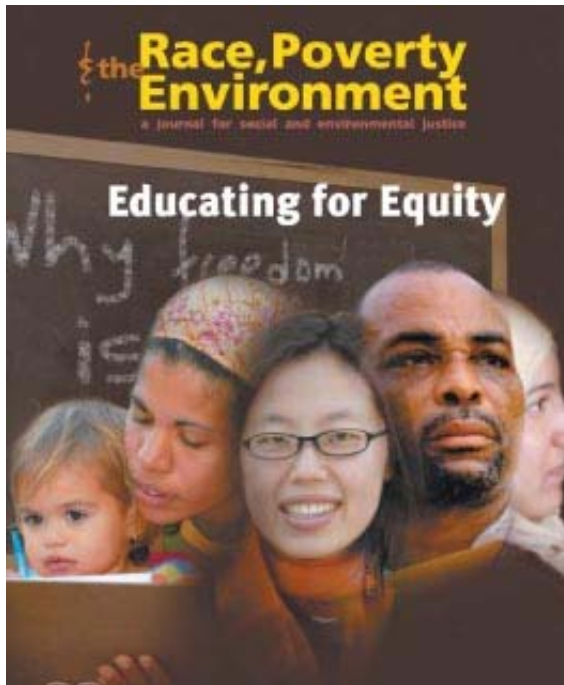
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