



## ***Editor's Note:***

### **“Social Theories, Student Realities”**

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*Teaching that begins with experiences distant from those of students devalues the personal experiences of students, contributes to an uncertain self, and academically constructs a person who cannot reflectively judge. This is particularly easy in international relations, which has had a tradition that says efforts to make the general public understand it is a waste of time. To teach students effectively, however, one must begin with some of their personal experiences so that they can have the sense that it is “safe” to use those experiences as a basis for judgement in things considered important by persons (like professors) who are viewed as significant. By teaching students in this fashion, the professor simultaneously does a number of things. She helps the student to link the personal with other experiences that are not personal; she helps the student to see and hear his or her own voice in distant persons and things; and she helps the student understand that it is out of the aggregate of specific experiences that general conceptions are constructed and to which those conceptions must return to ensure their continuing va-*

*lidity. Further, she will help students understand that their own reflections (which they author and for which they can safely claim authority) can become part of the modes of thinking that characterize university—as earlier defined. Residing in those reflections on their experiences, there may be something new in nature—something to be added to the human conversation. ...*

—Winston E. Langley, “Teaching, Learning, and Judging: Some Reflections on the University and Political Legitimacy”

I was quite fortunate recently, while editing the present issue of *Human Architecture*, to be reading and reflecting on a collection of wonderful essays by an array of teacher-scholars across diverse disciplines at UMass Boston. The book, *Achieving Against the Odds: How Academics Become Teachers of Diverse Students* (Temple University Press, 2001), edited jointly by Esther Kingston-Mann, professor of history and director of the Center for Improvement of Teaching (CIT) at UMass Boston, and Tim Sieber, associate professor of anthropology in the same institution, was kindly extended to me by Louise Z. Smith, Interim Dean of Liberal Arts at UMass Boston, as a welcoming gift for the occasion of my forthcoming appointment in Fall 2003 as an Assistant Professor of Sociology at UMass Boston.

I must say that I could have easily epigraphed the present editorial introduction using an excerpt from any of the essays in the volume. I could have, for instance, begun from that of Estelle Disch, professor of sociology at UMass Boston, whose disciplinary location I share and her pedagogical application of C. Wright Mills’s “Sociological Imagination” (i.e., the ability to link personal troubles and public issues) nicely echoes not only my own teaching style, but also the spirit of what Winston E.

Langley eloquently expresses above regarding his experience of teaching political science and international relations at UMass Boston. However, in the spirit of welcoming diversity (in this case in terms of dialogue across disciplines), I chose to begin with an excerpt from Lengley's chapter in the volume.

Although the issue of achievement against the odds in the midst of a diverse student (and faculty) population in an urban public university such as UMass Boston is the central theme of the book as reflected in its title, what drew my attention across all essays of the volume was the common strategy adopted by all in meeting that challenge—a strategy that is quite similar to my own teaching style as reflected partly in the purpose and mission of the present journal. The common strategy is that of taking up the challenge of diversity among students and faculty by establishing a dialectic between the common public issues brought up in course contents and the diverse personal troubles of both the students and faculty as explored during the semester. All the essayists in *Achieving Against the Odds*, commonly but in diverse ways, report the discovery and use of such a dialectic to be the central theme of their pedagogical strategy in meeting the challenge of diverse academic (and broader urban) environment. It will certainly not do justice to the complexity and cogency of each essay to summarize them in a brief introduction such as this. However, to acquaint the readers who may not have yet consulted the book, let me very briefly review each piece only to highlight the common concern with the dialectics of personal concerns and public issues running throughout the essays.

In "Coming Out and Leading Out: Pedagogy Beyond the Closet," Kathleen M. Sands, associate professor of religious studies at UMass Boston, addresses the conflicts arising from teaching of religious texts (or to religious minds) which are closed to di-

verse forms of sexuality. She finds that the conflict is managed more effectively through establishing a comfortable pedagogical spacetime where the subject matter is brought out of the closets of personal narratives into public discourses of student/faculty readings, learning, and discussions. "The broadest change in my relationships with students is that I now hear many more stories about their struggles to make moral sense of sexual complexity. It is as if the opening created by my coming out allows their unmetabolized suffering and unspoken confusion to find light and air. ... My self-understanding as a teacher also has had to grow in the movement out of the closet. ... I could name many similar instances in which my being available as an out teacher made a constructive impact on the lives of lesbian and gay students ... For my straight students as well, my coming out enriches not only their social sensibilities, but also their study of religion" (28, 29, 30).

In her essay, "Three Steps Forward, One Step Back: Dilemmas of Upward Mobility," Esther Kingston-Mann discusses how her own past personal experiences in the academia confronting class, gender, and ethnic snobbery that sought to silence her voice, led to the discovery and learning (from students and colleagues alike) of a pedagogy that involved teaching world-history through exploration of personal and local narratives. Her assigning students to conduct interviews with Vietnam veterans in the area, for instance, revealed what original and first-rate work students can produce as researchers, leading to rich intellectual exchanges with her about historical research and her own work. "While I could have predicted that student interview data might challenge my own assumptions about U.S. Vietnam veterans, I did not foresee how much this assignment would teach me about student abilities and potential. Skills and talents that are invisible in conventional classroom settings be-

gan to emerge into the open. In researching a topic that deeply interested them, students usually categorized as “unprepared” revealed strengths that are seldom utilized in the world of academe” (40-41).

The dialectic of the personal and the public is also strongly present in the voice of the “academic anthropologist” Tim Sieber as narrated in his piece “Learning to Listen to Students and Oneself.” Trying to understand why he de-emphasized students’ personal lives from their learning experiences earlier in his teaching career, he traces the causes to two major factors, personal and public: 1-dissociation from his own past as a first generation college graduate grown up in rural environment and transitioning to an urban public university setting, 2-impersonalized traditional teaching methods to which he had himself been exposed as part of his training. Sieber effectively narrates how, through listening to his students and himself, he finally discovered an alternative pedagogy, one centered on student journal writing, that allowed a dialogical teaching experience to emerge in contrast to the one-sided lecturing style of the earlier period. “Colleagues and my students increasingly helped me to understand how much my teaching constitutes a dialogue with students, a dialogue in which who the students are and what they think is central to the learning equation and to shaping the faculty’s contributions to the educational encounter. It was becoming more and more clear to me that to be an effective teacher, I had to offer more support for my students to tell me about themselves and their own thinking” (64).

In “Language and Cultural Capital: Reflections of a ‘Junior’ Professor,” Reyes Coll-Tellechea, associate professor of Hispanic studies at UMass Boston, narrates (as translated by Mark Zola) her surprising experience of discovering that the most important obstacle to her teaching Spanish literature to a class of Spanish speakers from diverse ethnic/national backgrounds

was the (painful) history of Spanish conquest of the Americas. For her, though, the bigger shock came when she discovered that in the dialogue of class readings, discussions, and writing assignments, students were as much understanding of her own personal identity troubles as she tried to be of theirs. The historical discomfort of having to teach Spanish, as a Spaniard, to Latin/American native speakers of the language, implying a renewed linguistic “conquest,” turned into an alternative exercise in mutual understanding and caring at the personal level—one which the earlier larger historical events desperately lacked. “After reading pages and pages [of student papers] full of Spanish and Native American words unknown to me (those of plants, cities, animals, smells, and textures that I had never experienced), I had to pause to call a friend. I needed to talk, not about the unknown vocabulary, but about a shocking experience; as my students were writing their own short autobiographies (loves, struggles, secrets, and all), they all left space for mine. They all wanted to tell me that they knew what I meant when I was talking about my bittersweet feelings regarding Spanish, and some wanted to advise me on how to deal with them” (85-6).

In his “Racial Problems in Society and in the Classroom,” Castellano B. Turner, professor of psychology at UMass Boston, relates his experience with the dialectics of racism in society at large and in his classrooms. Sensing over the years that the basic disagreements in both have been on “the extent and pace of change in race relations,” Turner reports on a significant discovery he made in making it possible to establish a constructive classroom environment for confronting such disagreements: “I had made a fundamental pedagogical error: I expected the students to meet me where I was, presenting abstractions such as stratification and domination, rather than meeting students where they were—struggling with the developmental transi-

tion from family into the larger world of intimacy and of getting along with others. ... When students see themselves as agents within an interpersonal encounter, they become more open to accepting the general dynamics of intergroup relations, especially in terms of power” (98, 99).

In her “Teaching (as) Composing,” Vivian Zamel, professor of English and director of the ESL program at UMass Boston, effectively relates how the transformation of her pedagogy from teaching of public rules and techniques of writing to that of substantive engagements of students (and teacher) with communication of their personal lives and troubles opened a completely new way of learning for her students—one that was less concerned with finding the “right answer” and more concerned with active and ongoing investigative and substantive learning of language. Zamel invited students to “bring themselves to the texts they write” (111), to empower themselves as “authors,” and learn that writing is not separate from and does not “proceed” a thinking and idea-generation stage but is and can be identical with it. “Students became authors alongside the authors they read, thus reclaiming authority for themselves. In short, their work represented the dialectical interplay between themselves and the course content, indicating not only the way the material affected them, but also the ways in which they were contributing to the material” (118).

Peter Nien-Chu Kiang, professor of education and director of the program in Asian American studies at UMass Boston, relates in his piece “Teaching, Tenure, and Institutional Transformation: Reflections on Race, Culture, and Resilience at an Urban Public University,” his experience of how he learned from and taught his students about the importance of wanting “to go on” despite and beyond the challenges of inherited social structures within and outside school. By redefining the expected

tenure requirements of scholarship, teaching, and service in terms of “sharing voices,” “crossing boundaries,” and “building communities,” Nien-Chu Kiang usefully problematizes university’s structures in an effort to enrich it with new and better structures for evaluating faculty and student work. Moving on the path of catering to the personal education needs of real students and faculty members in everyday life allows Nien-Chu Kiang certain detachment from institutionalized norms and procedures which in turn renders them less powerful when confronted with the voices of his colleagues, students, and his own. Even when metaphorically applying the strategy and tactics of Chairman Mao to classroom debates, he does not refrain from humbly admitting that the key to his success (or failures) lay in how he failed to take into account *all* the constituencies of the people (in this case students) to which he needed to reach out. “I had mistakenly assumed that they [the advanced students] saw themselves included in both the content and process of my organizing and teaching, but I had not talked directly to either of them about what I was doing or why. I was so concerned with reaching the middle and neutralizing the resistant core that I failed to affirm and invest in those students who could most benefit from working together with me. The course had not empowered them, and their feelings of frustration and disappointment still move me today, nearly a decade later, to think clearly about my priorities as a teacher and mentor” (137). I think it is this critical self-reflexiveness that best exemplifies and appreciates in practice the finding of Tim Sieber in his piece on “Listening to Students and Oneself.” More on this later.

Lois Rudnick, professor of English and director of American studies at UMass Boston, narrates in her “Teaching American Dreams/American Realities: Students’ Lives and Faculty Agendas” how in the course of ongoing contestations of diverse

American dreams among student and textual voices in her classes, she identified three important dimensions to the representational barriers that often freeze personal dialogues in debates: the barriers of mainstream vs. marginal dreams, the cross-cultural barriers of dreams (the “multicultural” in contrast to “intercultural” attitude), and the conflict between victimization and agency. Rudnick relates how in dealing with such barriers, her pedagogy was significantly enriched when she incorporated the dialectic of students’ personal notions of the American Dream with the broader historical literature and practices that are associated with the idea. “What has taken me the longest time to accept is that my students’ agendas are not and do not have to be the same as mine. It is this course, which begins and ends with student definitions of the American Dream, that has taught me this hard-earned lesson” (143).

The voice of Winston E. Langley in “Teaching, Learning, and Judging: Some Reflections on the University and Political Legitimacy,” an excerpt of which is epigraphed above, is powerful. However, the nuance of his message and how he arrived at it by experience, is itself worth telling. Langley relates how he was confronted with a puzzling low-performance result when administering abstract/applied conceptual examinations to his students, when in the course of in- and outside-class discussions, it seemed that students had much higher grasp of the meaning of concepts and issues than what their test results indicated. Tracing the matter to the heart of the meaning of democracy in practical terms, Langley soon realized—thanks to the brilliant linking by a student on welfare of the theory of money to her personal everyday experiences with “food stamps” and “Women as Third World”—that the problem lies in the separation of academic learning from personal “safe grounds” of everyday knowledge. Their fractured

selves being alienated from their personal lives in favor of an abstract notion and practice of democracy, citizens (and students) lose the ability to judge matters and make decisions, even when they “know the subject.” Langley proceeds to elaborate on how the production of fragmented and fractured selves serves the promotion of not real, but rhetorical democracy, and it is through the relinking of the substantive knowledges of citizens/students with their personal experiences that an effective and real democratic process may emerge.

As a sociologist of gender, Estelle Disch’s account, “Gender Trouble in the Gender Course: Managing and Mismanaging Conflict in the Classroom,” provides a vivid example of how self-critical reflexivity is a crucial and indispensable part of the personal-public dialectic in the conduct of meaningful academic pedagogy. Good sociological imaginations cannot dispense with it. Through persistent (and humble) critical self-inquiry, Disch not only illustrates how, despite painful classroom clashes and conflicts, open dialogue with the resistant voices can be accommodated inside and outside classroom, but also, through various exercises of weekly “response papers” and regular in-class feedbacks, preventive dialogues on gender can be generated across faculty-student axis before breaking out of control in the classroom. “These three incidents illustrate the complexity of silence and voice—how voice is expressed, how it has power to silence some people and not others, how it can sexualize the atmosphere in uncomfortable ways, and how central the teacher’s role is in attempting to establish a setting in which a maximum of voices can be heard in a respectful context. The learning that I am most struck by as I write about these three incidents is the need for frequent reassessment of what is going on in class—not just in terms of learning, but in terms of individual experience and classroom process” (197).



Finally, Pancho Savery, professor of English, humanities, and American studies at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, relates to us in his “Odd Man Out” how the process of his employment transition from UMass Boston to Reed College showed him the variabilities of regional, urban, campus, and class contexts affecting the teaching and learning about racism in the U.S. Having mixed feelings about both academic environments, Savery compares the immediate vs. the mediated experiences of the “real world” across the UMass and Reed campuses respectively, illustrating how the same academic texts and syllabi are confronted and enjoined differently by the different audiences of the two environments. In his words, “You can’t teach at UMass without bringing the real world into the classroom. What I mean by this is that the classroom is always an extension of one’s experiences in the real world. The middle and upper classes have layers between themselves and the world that insulate and protect. The working class has no such layers” (210). Savery’s account thereby problematizes the dialectics of private troubles and broader public issues as being themselves dependent on diverse spatiotemporal, social, and stratified contexts in which they are studied and pursued.

My effort above in identifying the common underlying theme of the essays collected in *Achieving Against the Odds* is not simply an exercise in book review. As I proceeded to carve out, in my own mind, the essential arguments of pieces as they relate to the central theme of the book, I began asking the question, Why is it, really, that the dialectic of the personal and the broader social issues is deemed by the experienced voices of the authors to be the key for meeting the challenge of teaching in a diverse student/faculty academic environment? Soon it became increasingly clear to me, as I linked the question to the “safe grounds” of my own teaching experience, that only a dialogical tension of the person-

al and the broader social provides an antidote to the abstract and impersonal environments in which prejudices, discriminations and injustices thrive. It is only in the emotionless, insensible, and abstract dialogue of faceless and impersonal voices that the possibility of misrepresentation and misappreciation of class, gender, racial, ethnic, religious, ability, age, and national diversities can take place and flourish. So long as voices of difference remain closeted, hidden, unspoken, (self)censored, and silent behind the abstract discourses on history, humanity, society, language, nationalism, politics, economics, and religion, there will always be potentials for misrepresentation and misinterpretation of human diversities in favor of discrimination, prejudice, and injustice.

Of course, this does not mean that abstract discourse and conceptual experimentation and creativity should be abandoned. On the contrary, to use Coll-Tellechea’s vocabulary, it is the production, distribution, and consumption of fragmented and “disciplined” theoretical knowledges that often in and of themselves reproduce the concrete historical misrepresentation and misappropriations of difference and diversity. The key here is not to abandon theoretical and abstract discourse, but find ways of integrating them with the concrete fabrics of everyday personal troubles of real people, student and faculty alike, in broader social and world-historical contexts. As a soon-to-be “junior faculty” recruited to teach sociological theory (among other subjects) at UMass Boston, I think the lesson commonly conveyed through the essays of the volume centrally hinges upon the need for integrating broad social theorizations with the diverse personal realities of students, faculty, and administrative members of the university to which I will be devoting a substantial part of my time and energy in the years to come.

Another important question that also crossed my mind and is worth bringing up

here (only briefly) as I listen to and reflect on the essays' voices—voices of their authors and of the students they often quote—are the notions of “teacher-scholar” or “teacher-learner” that often appeared in the narratives. Given that all essays without exception revealed the value of listening to and learning from the personal lives, experiences, and voices of students—“politically correct” or not—it would appear logical and fruitful to also speak of “student-scholars” as well as “student-teachers”—terms that were absent in the authors' vocabulary, though in substance and content were present in almost all the essays. Related to this, and also useful, would be experimentations with books and publications that combine voices of faculty *and students* (undergraduate and graduate) in their pages, in such a way that students' contributions could be as much stand-alone authorships of their own voices as they may be cited within the narratives of insightful faculty voices. It will certainly enrich the authors' dialogue, moreover, if students could be somehow integrated into CIT seminars, making them more diverse in a “reverse” way, of treating students as teachers of these seminars, as guest speakers, contributors, and advisors, and their articles (as well) be incorporated in the publications and proceedings of seminar participants.

As I reflected on the above, I was reminded of the wisdom of my late dissertation advisor, professor Terence K. Hopkins, who founded the Graduate Program of the Department of Sociology at SUNY Binghamton. A specialist in social theories and methods, and also in the sociology of small groups on one hand and of world-systems on the other, Hopkins used to emphasize that a more fruitful way of conceptualizing the relationship between students and faculty is in terms of the relationship of young and not-so-young *scholars*. Of course, as graduate students, we associated “students” with ourselves, but from my own

experience of undergraduate teaching, I think it would be fruitful to do the same in terms of faculty and undergraduate student relations as well.

But then, here, several important and interesting theoretical issues arise that may be at least touched upon here, if only briefly.

What the authors' essays vividly illustrate in *Achieving Against the Odds* is that, given the chance, students' voices and their intentional articulation in the process of academic instruction are indispensable for the creation and conduct of new and alternative pedagogical strategies of teaching amidst diversity. If we see the faculty as “teacher-scholars” and “teacher-learners,” of persons who both teach and learn, from other colleagues *and students* alike, and if, moreover, we also believe in “student-scholars” and “student-teachers,” who can be equal partners in authorship and practice of alternative pedagogies, then we may begin to see the value of transcending our inherited traditional sociological imaginations of “diversity” in terms of diversity among “persons” and begin to embrace diversity in terms of diversities of selves, within as well as across persons. If we recognize and see our intrapersonal as well as interpersonal diversities, it may in fact be more possible to transcend the dualisms and barriers Lois Rudnick encourages us to accomplish about our utopistic dreams of better worlds. This is because, we begin to see that the contestations of status quo and change, of mainstreamness vs. marginality, of victimization and agency, and of cultural identities do not exist simply across seemingly separate persons, but also have reality in terms of the contestation of multiple selfhoods.

If we readjust our theoretical lenses to this deeper quantal notion of society as a system of *self*-interactions rather than simply of assumed “individual” interactions, we may find that all “persons” involved in the academic discourse are more or less de-

veloped or integrated ensembles of teaching and learning *selves*. Once we embrace new sociological imaginations of the academe as a landscape of interacting selves within and across “teacher” and “student” bodies, once we see “diversity” of traditional dichotomies as breaking down in the complex intrapersonal architecture of multi-classed, multi-raced, multi-gendered, multi-faithed, multi-nationed, and multi-abled persons, then teaching diversity becomes as much a teaching (and learning from) one’s own selves as it is traditionally identified with the teaching of (and learning from) “others.” Then the “odds” facing “faculty” and “students” become as much an engagement with diversities *of others* as it will be an engagement with the inner diversities of our own voices within. Contestations across separate body organisms become re-imagined as contestations of inner voices, within and without. I think it is in this light that the most intriguing aspect of the essays in *Achieving Against the Odds* comes to light: the strength and courage with which each and every one of the authors has publicly subjected their own diverse inner voices to conscious and intentional self-critical scrutiny.

Since its inception *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* has devoted its pages to the empowerment of searching souls, students and faculty (and non-academic) alike, in search of critical global self-knowledge and change. The articles chronicled in this issue of the journal, produced by undergraduate students of diverse standing enrolled in my courses during the Spring 2003 semester at SUNY Oneonta, also narrate struggles of self-critical voices seeking to problematize their personal troubles in the context of introductory and more advanced sociological theories to which they were exposed in various classes. What they reveal above all is that sociological perspectives and theories are best learned in the context of concrete explorations of personal issues in the con-

text of broader public and social forces. Social theories are best learned by students through empowerment of their voices as authors exploring issues that has fractures their “safe grounds” in the distant or near past, but are subject to remedy, repair, and renewal. As the articles contained herein demonstrate, for the first time previous issues of *Human Architecture* were used as semi-required readings in these classes, exposing students to their own writings and voices across classes, semesters, and campuses. Representative student-scholars in the present issue grapple with important personal issues ranging from habituations to smoking and drinking, to challenges shyness, family obligations and dysfunctions, peer judgments and discriminations, gender conflicts, and family planning considerations pose to their academic and non-academic pursuits at a crucial stage in their life course. The dialectics of social theories and student realities thereby are learned in an applied sociological environment conducive of both student and teacher learning.

Given what I have read in *Achieving Against the Odds*, I am certain that the tradition of *Human Architecture* will continue to take root on the soil of UMass Boston as well. Now I understand why I was presented the book to read in preparation for my arrival at the university in Fall 2003. For this, I pass on the gift of *Achieving Against the Odds* and dedicate the present issue of the journal to the sociology faculty at UMass Boston whose warm reception and subsequent support will make the continuity of *Human Architecture* possible.

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July 2003