

## **Postmodern Education and Social Ethics by Bob Samuels**

**(In order to encourage more audience participation at the APCS conference, I am circulating my conference ahead of time. During the actual panel, I will outline the themes of this paper, and then Mark Bracher will respond. We also intend to have plenty of time for audience feedback. This paper is excerpted from my book *New Media, Cultural Studies, and Critical Theory after Postmodernity*)**

In order to illustrate some of the ways that a psychoanalytically informed model of pedagogy can help to instill a more progressive and effective form of postmodern education, I want to look at Mark Bracher's "Teaching for Social Justice: Reeducating the Emotions through Literary Studies," where he challenges us to question the ability of literary education to promote social justice.<sup>1</sup> In particular, he examines what blocks the efforts of well-intentioned teachers to attain the ethical results that they often desire. One of the primary reasons that he gives for this failure to effectively promote social change is the fact that many contemporary academics have a fear of imposing a morality onto their students: "Because morality is associated with asserting values, passing judgment, and controlling behavior, many critics have viewed it as oppressive, immoral, and to be avoided" (464). In contrast to these scholars who shy away from moral issues, Bracher asserts that it is impossible to avoid advocating a moral position; in fact, the very gesture of bracketing morality in education imposes the modern moral idea that one should avoid moralizing.

It is important to point out that Bracher is not promoting a turn to a moral discourse that would be cut off from direct social action; rather, he is quick to argue that

many moral arguments only serve to justify a delaying of social involvement, and most important of all, he emphasizes Geoffrey Harpham's idea that morality is often excluded from critical discourse because critics "desire to maintain an identity of moral purity and self-righteousness" (465). In the context of progressive education, Bracher adds that teachers avoid entering into ethical and moral discussions with their students because faculty members do not want to risk their own sense of being highly ethical and moral beings.<sup>2</sup> In other words, educators put such a high value on their own self-perception of being morally pure that they end up teaching in an unethical or amoral way.

Central to Bracher's overall argument, which is elaborated in the book *Radical Pedagogy*, is his idea that all real learning involves a transformation of the student, and therefore there can be no such thing as a purely neutral or amoral educational transaction. Moreover, real education cannot help but to change a student's behavior, and thus it is only logical to ask how we can promote a change in students' actions in a positive way. For Bracher this promotion of positive social change is defined in the following manner, "The question, then, is how to get our students to behave in ways that reduce suffering and injustice—that is, to behave less harmfully and more justly toward individuals and groups who are currently suffering unnecessarily as a result of our students' and their compatriots' actions (including non-action)" (466). The main way that this mode of teaching for social justice occurs in literary education is through the effort to reduce or eliminate students' prejudices regarding other social groups. However, Bracher argues that we have very little evidence indicating that this type of prejudice reduction through

education works. Even more troubling is the idea that we do not have any strong theories to explain how this mode of progressive education could function in the first place.

For Bracher, the main reason why scholars have been unable to define and enact progressive educational agendas is that they are often working with simplified and misguided conceptions of individual psychology. To be more precise, Bracher posits that the central problem with these educational efforts is that they do not account for the possibility that students' beliefs and values are not usually changed by rational arguments and facts. To prove this point, Bracher indicates how the strength of preexisting beliefs often resists the power of new information, and so there is an inherent "conservativeness" to our subjectivities.<sup>3</sup>

One of the central causes for this resistance to educational efforts is the strong role played by emotions in shaping our beliefs and ideological commitments: "Thus a fundamental reason that current practices of literary study are ineffective in reducing injustice is because the persistence of injustice is not due ultimately to lack of knowledge, lack of analytical skill, or even lack of the right principles or values; it is due to lack of emotional change" (469). According to this logic, progressive educational efforts must be centered on a pedagogy of affect and not on a pedagogy of rational thought. This argument, of course, flies in the face of our entire modern Western tradition of seeing reason and rationality as the driving force behind progressive social change.<sup>4</sup>

Bracher's alternative strategy is centered on the idea that a pedagogy of compassion and sympathy must be developed in order to counter the indifference that often dominates contemporary subjects. In citing the works of Richard Rorty, Robert

Solomon, and Martha Nussbaum, he posits that we need a new mode of sentimental education, and this is where I find a problem with his central argument. Instead of seeing compassion and sympathy as the source for the solution, I argue that these privatized emotions are a major source of the problem. In other words, what our students need to learn, and what they have often not been taught, is the need for collective action and social consciousness. In fact, I would claim that even if we base our conceptions of affect and emotional compassion on a social understanding of human emotions, the effect of concentrating education on affect is still a movement toward aspects of human subjectivity that are most often perceived from an individualistic perspective.<sup>5</sup>

I would argue that our new media culture offers unlimited opportunities to be compassionate in relationship to the suffering of strangers.<sup>6</sup> In fact, many of my students have been highly affected by media depictions of natural disasters around the world, and some have even sent money and have volunteered time to help prevent horrific tragedies thousands of miles away. Yet, I do not see these same students changing their strongly individualistic and antisocial views and ideologies. In fact, many students who are highly sympathetic to the suffering of others are still tied to a libertarian sense of social justice.<sup>7</sup> While affect plays a strong role in these libertarian beliefs, a heightened sense of compassion or sympathy may not make these students more socially conscious, and since so much of their world has been shaped by the privatization of the social and the public, sentimental literary education may only provide more effective psychological tools for the individualization of experience.

## **The Politics of Empathy**

As an example of why compassion can play a negative role in the promotion of positive social change, I want to reflect briefly on my experience as a union president and political activist. In virtually all of the important battles I have fought, I have had to defend people whom I do not like or respect. For instance, in a grievance case on which I worked, the person I was defending insisted on wearing a George W. Bush pin to each of our meetings. In another case, the faculty member I was supporting constantly attacked the idea of unions and my personal investment in faculty unionization. Yet, I defended these people because they had the right to be defended and our contract was on their side. I must admit that at no point did I feel any sense of compassion or sympathy for their plights.

Now it may seem that I am arguing for a return to the old modern notion of the pure, impersonal, neutral law, but this is only part of my argument. Following Freud's notion of transference, and the later idea of countertransference, I believe that the main reason why we need to understand the roles of unconscious emotions in our subjectivity is to learn how to acknowledge and regulate these affective elements. I am not saying that we should repress or deny them; rather, I am asking that we learn how to work with them and not let them control us. In all activities, affects are important source of information, but they can never be the only sources for positive social change.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to Bracher's article, while it may be true that we are more willing to help someone whom we believe is not responsible for their own suffering, I would argue that we also need to learn how to help people who are responsible for their own plight. Or

to be more exact, we have to learn how to help people by bracketing the question of responsibility. While this effort to avoid assigning responsibility will inevitably require us to monitor our own reactions, after we acknowledge how we feel, we need to move onto a more generalized social rule and action. To illustrate this point, I will turn to an example that Bracher gives regarding the way our sense of whom is responsible for suffering affects our ability to give others sympathy.

Bracher describes the situation where a customer gives a waitress a low tip because the customer feels the waitress has been unresponsive and inattentive (475). The customer then finds out that the waitress' four year-old-daughter has recently been killed in a car accident. Due to this new knowledge, the customer feels sympathetic and gives a better tip. For Bracher, this story shows how we change our attitude toward people when we find out that they are not responsible for their faulty actions, and yet, I would posit that this moral judgment still relies on a private sense of the distribution of justice. In fact, I used to tip the wait staff based on their individual performance, until I found out that most wait staff pool their tips, and so my effort to penalize one person was hurting several people. Once again, a general principle appears to override the development of compassion as the driving force behind positive social change.

Related to this question of assigning responsibility to people for their own faulty actions is Bracher's strong claim that we often blame others for their problems instead of seeing how problems are caused by forces beyond the individual's control. Here I believe Bracher runs into a major paradox. On the one hand, he wants students to see that people are not primarily responsible for their problems, and on the other hand, he wants his

students to become responsible for how they respond to other people's suffering? Doesn't he stress the social and environmental when he is discussing the root cause of social issues, but he stresses individual affects when he is concentrating on the cure for these problems? In other terms, doesn't the focus on sympathy and compassion blame the viewer of suffering for being indifferent?

I think the problems in Bracher's overall argument probably stem from his effort to counter the standard ways of approaching these issues by offering an important and radically different perspective. After all, his stress on affect over cognition does not mean that he rejects the standard modern idea that new information can result in positive social change; rather, Bracher is trying to add to this older argument by combining a new element, which is that affect is often the key element blocking the learning of new information. It is important to stress that most of the examples that Bracher gives for this affective mode of resistance also include faulty judgment and misguided attributions: in other words, emotional resistances are tied to unconscious ideologies in ways that challenge the cognition versus affect binary.<sup>9</sup>

In his discussion of cognitive schemas, Bracher offers a more nuanced and complex theory of affect that helps us to understand the multicausal foundation of all human judgments:

Such schemas are essential for perception, understanding, and memory. By filling in gaps in the information available to us, they allow us to perceive a distant ball as a sphere rather than a disk and to make sense of snippets of conversation we overhear or movies or stories into which we enter at midstream, and they also

enable us to assess the emotions, intentions, and even character of other people on the basis of their gestures, facial expressions, or speech. (480)<sup>10</sup>

These schemas help us to understand both the positive and negative aspects of what we often call intuition or holistic thinking, and one of the key roles of education, like psychoanalysis, is to make these unconscious frameworks conscious. Furthermore, in his discussions of causal schemas, Bracher shows how the teaching of correct information and knowledge still plays an essential role in changing the faulty assumptions that people make on an unconscious level. For example, in his explanation of why Americans tend to blame individuals for poverty, crime, and illness, Bracher rightly sees that the major reason for this attribution error is the simplified causal schema that allows people to find a single cause for a multicausal issue. However, I think he neglects to stress how this mental shortcut is trained into people through the media, which constantly seeks to depict noncomplex and nonsystemic causal models. Of course, blaming the media is also too simple, and my own approach needs to be placed within a more multilayered model of causality.

Still I want to insist that we all do need to learn new information about social issues and that our inability to understand the root causes of these problems stems not only from our truncated explanations but also from our failure to grasp complex systems. For example, very few people know that one of the leading causes of poverty in Africa is the high level of subsidies that American and European governments pay their farmers to produce crops at an artificially cheap rate.<sup>11</sup> Most Americans probably believe that they actually do have free trade, and thus the problems of African poverty are solely the

problems of Africans. To correct this faulty attribution, one has to not only overcome a false attribution, but one also has to provide new knowledge concerning how our economic system really works.

Another example of how the learning of new systematic knowledge is needed to correct faulty judgments can be seen in the way that most Americans see the stock market as a direct indication of the health of the U.S. economy. Since very few people understand how speculative markets really work, they constantly make judgments based on truncated models of causality. However, even if we made people aware of these short-circuited methods of thinking, we still would not resolve the problem of their lack of knowledge concerning the stock market.

Perhaps the biggest area where this lack of systemic knowledge is apparent is in the way many Americans think about taxes and public programs. Due to a 30-year campaign by both Republicans and Democrats, a large number of U.S. citizens believe that all taxes are theft, and the best thing to do with the welfare state is to get rid of it. On one level, Bracher helps to explain the causes for this libertarian ideology by showing how all economic and social problems have been blamed on individuals. However, even his more complicated causal schemas (484, 486) do not account for the effective way that politicians have reeducated Americans to believe that government and taxes are by definition bad. As so many recent surveys show, most Americans resent paying taxes because they are simply ignorant of the fact that without taxation and governmental programs, we would have no police, mail, fire protection, highways, safe drinking water,

etc.<sup>12</sup> I would argue that our educational system has simply failed in distributing this vital information concerning the basic roles of government and taxation.

Fundamentally, Bracher tends to go too far in removing individual responsibility and social consciousness from his depictions of the causes of many social problems. After all, a driving force behind psychoanalysis is the effort of getting patients to see their own role in perpetuating the systems that oppress them. This does not mean that one should simply blame the victim or reinforce self-defeating victim identifications; rather, we need people to understand their own roles in larger social systems.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is important to follow Bracher's own advice in avoiding the easy position of blaming all problems on the other, while we remain comfortable in our self-idealizing moral positions.

### **Literary Education and Social Change**

Bracher believes that the study of literature can use more complex causal models and schema in order to help all of us move away from our self-justifying positions. While I cannot do full justice to his nuanced discussion of how to employ causal schemas in the literature classroom (490), I do want to point out that his model could use a more psychoanalytic perspective. For much of his pedagogy involves getting students to realize their faulty causal schemas and attributions and then learning more complex and accurate models of character assessment. In fact, most of his discussion of how his pedagogical method would actually work in the classroom involves students consciously acknowledging their own truncated causal schemas and consciously developing more complex causal models. Yet, I would posit that psychoanalysis shows us why students are

so invested in their old models of explanation and why they often resist learning new causal models: due to their unconscious investment in irrational and unconscious identity-enforcing ideologies, students will often block the educational effort to get them to give up their present explanatory models.

Furthermore, it is very easy for students to dissociate their knowledge of fictional characters from their investments in their own lives.<sup>14</sup> To Bracher's credit, he does offer several suggestions of how teachers can get their students to bridge this gap between literary and personal knowledge; however, I would argue that his model still needs to pay more attention to the role of unconscious resistances in the blocking of educational efforts. My own recent work on the rhetoric of resistance has convinced me that we need to develop radically new pedagogical methods, which effectively address students' unconscious investments without rushing to a conscious-oriented discourse. For example, teachers can use anonymous free writing assignments and online chat discussions to get students to address their unconscious investments in a nonthreatening environment.<sup>15</sup> Also students can relate their literary interpretations to their analysis of their own dreams and fantasies. In turn, this very individualistic sounding mode of analysis could be combined with the learning of the types of systemic knowledge that I have been discussing. However, while literary analysis can help to model certain critical thinking methodologies, it most often provides for a privatization of social experience, a repression of unconscious investments, and the downplaying of social consciousness. Moreover, although we may all need to learn how to be more sympathetic toward the

targets of our moral stigmatization, we also need to affirm the role of each individual in perpetuating destructive social systems of injustice.

<sup>1</sup> The original version of my critique of Bracher's work appeared in *JAC: Journal of Advanced Composition*.

<sup>2</sup> Bracher's analysis, and most other academic theories concerning social change, does not account for the way a teacher's professional status may affect how he or she teaches.

■ For instance, nontenured faculty who are evaluated primarily by their students may have a stronger concern for not alienating or pushing their students.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout his work, Žižek also makes the claim that people do not change because of rational arguments or better information. Following the work of Peter Sloterdijk, Žižek posits that people with racist viewpoints know that they are racist, but they either enjoy

■ their racism or choose to be racist anyway (Žižek, *Tarrying 214*).

<sup>4</sup> For a similar argument on the pedagogy of affect, see Lynn Worsham, "Going Postal: Pedagogical Violence and the Schooling of Emotion."

<sup>5</sup> One can posit that affect most often involves symbolic interpretations that have been repressed; in other words, emotions appear to be private, but their origin is often social.

<sup>6</sup> In my *Teaching the Rhetoric of Resistance*, I articulate many of the negative effects of basing education and culture on empathy.

<sup>7</sup> While it is risky to generalize about students, I believe it is essential to take a critical perspective on how we often idealize or ignore our students.

<sup>8</sup> One reason why many people shy away from calling into question the role of emotions in progressive social processes is that people want to avoid seeming impersonal or against what is often coded to be feminine affects.

<sup>9</sup> Although Bracher complicates his promotion of affect in education, his work does tend to follow the same turn to affect that I have located in Žižek’s work and many other post-Lacanian. Moreover, the fact that these emotions are shaped by unconscious ideologies | shows how the Symbolic order produces its own Other and limit in the form of affects that appear to go beyond the Symbolic.

<sup>10</sup> Bracher’s use of schemas can be compared to Lacan’s idea that meaning is always an Imaginary organization of a whole that is greater than the sum of the pieces. In this gestalt structure, the Imaginary totality of the body in the mirror image becomes the model for the Imaginary totality of a body of knowledge.

<sup>11</sup> For more on how American farm subsidies increase African poverty, see “Trade, Not | Aid: Farm Protectionism Threatens Farms in Africa, Wallets in America, and Lives everywhere?”

<sup>12</sup> To see what students think about taxes and government programs, I have been having them answer anonymous surveys for the last several years, and I am always surprised regarding their limited knowledge of how the government actually uses taxes.

<sup>13</sup> Lacan’s “Intervention on Transference” offers an effective introduction to how psychoanalysis helps people to see their roles in the structures that oppress them.

<sup>14</sup> The risk of using fictional texts to teach anything about the social realm is that fiction always confuses the border between the real and the fake; moreover, as we shall see, fictional texts allow for diverse ethical loopholes. After all, one can always say, it was just a story, or just a character, or just a joke.

| <sup>15</sup> I discuss this strategy in Chapter 1 of *Teaching the Rhetoric of Resistance*.