

Fighting to be Different in the Academy

Tony Van der Meer

Then I remember why I still work in a university. It's because I'm an activist-scholar, someone who sees the value in radical education and into public debate of ideas which challenges the norm. I bring my activism into the university for a number of reasons. In spite of the way they are being re-engineered, universities are still amazing places of encounter, conflict, diversity and debate (not to mention resources), and it is crucial that we find ways to defend and expand these and open them up to others. Engaging with the activist world, while it raises the eyebrows of many senior colleagues, excites and inspires my students. (Chatterton, P., 2008)

Chatterton (2008) took some of the words out of my mouth in partially explaining my 20 years teaching at the University of Massachusetts Boston as an activist-scholar. My entry into the academy was different than many of my colleagues who enter as tenure track faculty, or with dreams of the tenure-track. Like a growing number of faculty, I came to the university as an adjunct. I was not quite aware of what the particular differences between tenure track and non-tenure track even were before I began teaching. Being naïve taught me a lot about reality in the academic world. It also exposed the tensions and politics of being an academic and an activist.

What I learned over the years was that I brought an important value to teaching that many of my colleagues both tenure track and non-tenure track lacked: engagement. What I also learned is that teaching is valued least in relation to how tenure is awarded across the board. Research and scholarship are the tails wagging the dog. The implicit understanding of respected research is that which brings grants to the university, and scholarship is about those who get published in "respectable" publications and presses.

My longevity at UMass Boston and that of other faculty like myself at the university contradicts the status quo of the tenure track system and in some cases the mission of the university. I'm very proud that the university I teach at promotes itself as "student centered," yet the system rewarding faculty does not value what the students benefit the most from: teaching. Students don't pay tuition mainly because of the respectable publications that faculty are published in, nor the grants they receive for research. This is not an outright dismissal of the relevance of getting published or receiving grants. It's more about focusing particularly on what is the purpose of education at a publicly funded university with an "urban", "student centered" mission. What is meant by "urban" and what should be the commitment of a publicly funded university that serves the "urban" in a "student centered" way? As popular as Freire (1974) is in the academy, why is this such a complicated question? Also for the sake of this article, in what ways does activist-scholars add value to student learning, and the purpose or mission of the university?

According to June (2015) activist academics, particularly tenure track faculty, are considered to be “gambling with their careers” (p.1). In the academy there is also a “perception” (p. 2) that “activism taints their scholarship” (p. 2). These concerns seem to be passive ways of challenging research methodologies that are specific to different academic disciplines. They also suggest a certain methodological rigidity in fields especially when it is widely acknowledged that there are different ways of knowing in many academic disciplines.

The fact that activist-scholars, especially in the social science and humanities, are passionate, engaged, and, participate in social justice movement activities does not bias or invalidate their observations and analysis of an inquiry. Bentz & Shapiro (1998) recognizes the challenges and changes in research methods:

...we recognize that the study of people and their institutions may rightfully entail a variety of approaches. Some are quantitative, and some are qualitative. Some call for the researcher to be detached and impersonal, others call for direct engagement and involvement. Some require strongly developed skills in data manipulation and statistical analysis, others require “people” skills. A good research project will match the research approach to the problem to be studied, and it will ensure that the research is comfortable and competent in his or her role. (p. 9-10)

Unfortunately, too often, the qualitative method in its various approaches according to Denzin & Lincoln (2008) “serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power and for truth....and representation of “the Other”” (p. 1). Denzin & Lincoln also pointed out that by colonial, they mean that “research, becomes an objective way of representing the dark-skinned Other to the white world” (p. 1). For activist-scholars, participatory practice is an approach that “locate[s] community development at the heart of the process” (Ledwith & Springett, 2010, p. 14). In other words, activist-scholars employ scientific research that are just as valid as their traditional colleagues using quantitative or qualitative methods.

At the University of Massachusetts Boston, as well as many other academic institutions, a central issue is recognizing and rewarding the value added to the university and to student learning by activist scholars who are non-tenure track. Activist-scholars bring more of a connection to the real world for the primary shareholders at the university: students. This is particularly in line with the “urban” mission that speaks to a working-class population that is ethnically diverse, with high poverty rates in the Black, Latino, and, Caribbean neighborhoods.

Furthermore, it is activist-scholars who tend to be more at ease and pedagogically able to engage classrooms of diverse students to critically think and write, relating the content of their learning to their political realities of racism, sexism, poverty, violence, homophobia, xenophobia, environmentalism, war, and, oppression, realities that our students face daily

A small cadre of non-tenure track activist-scholars at the University of Massachusetts Boston have played a significant role, through the faculty union, engaging faculty, students, staff, and, administrators into recognizing and rewarding non-tenure track faculty, winning health care benefits, wage increases, and multiple year contracts. Their continued efforts have won an important victory, allowing non-tenure track faculty to receive continuous contracts after three years of service, at a respectable salary, depending on their half-time, three-quarter time, or, full-time typical teaching load. While the most recent contract offers more stability,

however, there is still a lack of pay equity between the tenure track and the non-tenure track faculty. Full time non-tenure track faculty teach four courses per semester and get paid less than tenure track faculty who teach two courses per semester. Tenure track faculty are required to do research and have access to a larger pool of money to conduct research, travel, and, attend conferences. Non-tenure track faculty are not required to do research and receive little money for projects, and, travel. Yet, we all teach the same population, and the students in our courses receive the same amount of credits per course. Moreover, many of nontenure track faculty also do conduct research, including but not limited to the activist-scholarship that is the focus of this essay.

Radical Education

The term radical today is being associated with the perverted, distorted, and, inhuman religious practices of people who say they are upholding Islam. The word radical is being used as a term that implies terrorizing people. The term has become a propaganda tool to bully the 99% of the U.S. population, as well as people globally in order to maintain their obedience to the influences of the wealthy 1%. The term radical as used throughout the corporate media is missing its meaning as ‘going to the root’ of an issue, or pursuing ‘drastic political, economic, or social reforms.’ The 40 year-old journal, *Radical Teacher*, associates the term radical with examining “the root cause of inequality and promot[ing] the idea that educators should also be activists working for progressive social change” (2015, p. 2). The ideas of a radical education, challenging the norms, re-engineering universities, engagement, and, inspiring students, all have shaped my development as an activist-scholar. This development goes as far back to the third grade and serves as a powerful reminder that a simple experience with a teacher outside of the classroom can have a major impact on students.

In my experience, from the third grade to high school, there were three particular people that impacted my notions of what radical means. My third-grade teacher; my Jr. High School, and, High School Principal, and, my High School Guidance Counselor all in their various small ways demonstrated aspects of what a radical education is. The values practiced by these educators interested in progressive social change impacted my view of the world.

My Third Grade Teacher

After the assassination of President Kennedy, my third-grade teacher was fascinated and talked about the First Lady, Jackie Kennedy. It was around the spring of 1964 when Mrs. Kennedy was living in New York somewhere on 5th avenue. I’m not quite sure how it came about but somehow my teacher arranged to take another student and myself on a Sunday sight-seeing visit to where Mrs. Kennedy lived. She wanted us to be able to possibly get a live glimpse of what the First Lady looked like. It could be easy to speculate now that the other student and I were accomplice to my teacher stalking Mrs. Kennedy. We were two Black kids dressed in our best Easter clothes sitting on each side of our teacher on the bench waiting to see the former First Lady. While we never did see Mrs. Kennedy, but our teacher did take us to a delicatessen and treated us to something to eat.

Though stalking JFK’s widow might not seem all that politically meaningful on the surface, this was a radical experience for me during that time. Although teachers took students on field trips, this experience was different. It was not during the normal school day. It took place

on a Sunday, and it only involved another student and myself, not the entire class. It wasn't seeing Jackie Kennedy that mattered to me. It was the idea that a teacher would take time out of her schedule on a Sunday, pick me up from my house in Harlem and take us out downtown. Even if it was in her own self interest to see Jackie Kennedy, the idea that she wanted the other student (my friend) and I to go with her to share this experience impacted me. This particular experience was a 'drastic' change in what I had perceived as to how teachers relate to students. The outing experience with my third-grade teacher was an important one, especially as a poor working class Black kid growing up in Harlem, New York, attending a public school in 1964, and living in a world Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described as the "quick sands of racial injustice" (Washington, 1986, p. 218).

My Jr. High and High School Principal

In Jr. High and High School, I had the same Principal, Mr. Robert Dotson. He was one of the most brilliant Black men I knew. He led a diverse but predominately white school in Yonkers, New York, a city that, just like Boston, was at that time immersed in legal actions around school segregation. Mr. Dotson kept me out of troubles way, and always took the time to privately engage me philosophically about what was happening in the world and how it related to me as a person and student. Although he had projected a stern disciplinarian manner about himself, he was the passionate teacher always taking advantage of the teachable moment. A number of white teachers disliked the idea of working under a Black Principal, but Mr. Dotson was fearless and assertive about his leadership. He was conscious and proud of his Blackness and was one of the fairest people I have known. He believed in and practiced restorative justice before it became popular.

I'm not sure what the occasion was (some kind of trouble) when I was in Mr. Dotson's office and he began to lecture me on Apartheid. Part of the lecture was more of a complaint about someone finding a South African Kuggarand coin in some canned pineapples at the school. This was one of his teachable moments where I began to learn about the racist apartheid policy in South Africa. Instead of hearing a stern speech about why I was in the principal's office, Mr. Dotson made me feel relaxed and he was encouraging me to learn more about the world. I remember in his passionate and animated way of asking me rhetorically "you know what I did with those cans?" and him responding proudly and in a matter of fact way declared, "I sent them back." During this encounter, Mr. Dotson treated me with respect, the kind of respect that he gave to teachers and other adults he conversed with.

I was in Mr. Dotson's office again on January 12, 1970 after getting into a scuffle with a white teacher in my study period class. I remembered this date because I was in study period reading the front page of the *New York Times* about the Super Bowl between the Minnesota Vikings and the Kansas City Chiefs (Lelyveld, 1970). After reading the top front-page article, I turn the paper over to the bottom page and was stunned at what I saw. There was a picture with a story about my 12 year-old brother—he had died of a heroin overdose. The story continued onto another full page and after reading the entire story I told the teacher that I needed to go to the bathroom. The study room teacher refused to let me go. I decided that I didn't need his permission and proceeded to the bathroom anyway. He tried to stop me, and we got into a scuffle. My shirt got torn and his watch got broken.

After the scuffle was broken up, I had to go to the principal's office. If I recall correctly, we had a meeting in Mr. Dotson's office with the teacher, a union representative, myself, Mr.

Dotson and maybe someone else. I knew I was in trouble with a meeting like this, but Mr. Dotson was very transparent. He said to all those present at the meeting that “we all knew about the story about Mr. Van Der Meer’s brother in the New York Times.” He said “we should have pulled him out of class and sent him home.” Mr. Dotson, said “instead we did nothing.” He said that I got my shirt ripped and the teachers watch got broken, “so we will call that evens.” Mr. Dobson said that I would be sent home to cool out, and that being sent home “was not a suspension.”

On another occasion, I remember coming to school a couple of minutes late, I believe it was May 5, 1970, and as I entered the side building of Hawthorne Jr. High School, a bunch of predominately white students were sitting in the hallway with armbands on and holding some handmade posters protesting the Kent State massacre. After asking, and them explaining what was going on, I asked if anyone had an extra armband and joined the protest. As other students were trying to go to their classes while we sat down on the hallway floor, Mr. Dotson appeared. In his flair for the dramatics, Mr. Dotson stood at the other end of the hall in a superman pose shouting in a stern voice, “What are you doing in my hallway?” He frightened some of the students who were ready to leave. I don’t know where I found the voice, but I responded by saying “Don’t leave!” urging them to remain seated. I told Mr. Dotson that we were protesting the National Guard murdering of the four students at Kent State. Mr. Dotson did this thing where he reached his arm out in front of him twirling his fingers as if he was grabbing the air trying to bring it back to him said, “Come here, Mr. Van Der Meer.”

All I could think of then was that I was in big trouble now. Mr. Dotson arranged for the leaders of the protest and myself to meet in his office, but we weren’t in trouble. Instead Mr. Dotson agreed that we would have a school assembly to call for a moratorium on the war and talk about Kent State. I’m not sure whose idea it was but we agreed to send President Nixon a telegram asking for him to declare a moratorium on the Viet Nam War. I was somehow chosen to speak at the assembly, and Mr. Dotson kept me in his office after the other students left. I told him I didn’t know what to say at the school assembly. Mr. Dotson said that I could speak about “ecology, student unrest, and the war.” I told Mr. Dotson that I didn’t even know what “ecology” was. Mr. Dotson coached me into addressing these issues. It later became clearer to me that Mr. Dotson had a political and social consciousness and wanted to see progressive social change. As an educator, his influence on me had a radical impact on how I saw both education and social change. He played an import role in how I began to develop as an activist.

My High School Guidance Counselor

The same year that I began High School, Mr. Dotson became the Principal there as well. I had to visit his office in high school on a number of occasions also. But the office I frequented the most was my guidance counselor, Mrs. Eve Forman. Besides Mr. Dotson, Mrs. Forman was the other person who helped shape my intellectual development. As best she could, she made sure that the existing barriers of race, power, and privilege were removed between our interactions in order to build a trusting relationship. Mrs. Forman went beyond the call of duty. She was always available, not only during school hours, she was available after school and during the weekends.

Mrs. Forman personally drove her station wagon packed with students up and down New York, and New England to theaters, museums, symphonies, sports games, college visits, and restaurants. She introduced me to James Haskins, a Manhattanville college lecturer and prolific

author of over 100 books. I sat in his Psychology of Black English class as a substitute for my psychology class, which was based on his forthcoming book, *Psychology of Black Language* (1973). Mrs. Forman drove me to all of those classes. I was very excited about reading Haskins book *Dairy of a Harlem School Teacher* (1969) to see if I could connect his understanding to my experience going to school in Harlem.

The exposure to and alongside Mrs. Forman made me more and more curious. I got interested in the writings of British psychiatrist R. D. Lang, and tried to understand his work *Self and Others* (1969). Mrs. Forman took some other students and me to NYU to watch a documentary Lang was in about schizophrenia. Lang had raised a powerful point in the film asking something to the effect of, how we can call someone crazy because they feel that they have a bomb ticking inside them; yet, congress has the power to drop bombs on people and that was supposed to be acceptable?

What was unique about Mrs. Forman was that she shared more than just the professional side of her life. She trusted other students and myself in driving her car, brought us to her house for dinner, and took some of us out to restaurants with her family. I spent plenty of time with her entire family, including her mother and brother.

When I spent the summer at Marist College Upward Bound Program in Poughkeepsie, New York, she drove some of us there. When I had doubts about going to college, she came by to pick me up, loaded my trunk in her station wagon and drove me to Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, dropping me off on Huntington Ave near Spear Hall dormitory. This was her second time bringing me to Boston.

I'm sure that many students can testify to having educators who have played a special role in their lives. I would argue that those educators were not the rule. My third-grade teacher, Mr. Dotson, and, Mrs. Forman were the exceptions. It is from my experiences with them and other educators during my secondary and college years that I have pulled in developing my activism, teaching, and, scholarship.

In becoming an academic I had a lot of assumptions as to what that meant. I didn't fully understand the politics and structure of tenure, nor did I really care about them. I didn't even know how competitive it was to get a full-time job teaching at a university. It was my activism that opened the door and attracted me to academia. It was also my activism that helped me to develop the skills that I could transfer into the classroom. The curiosity and questions that activism provoked in me were a guiding force pushing my scholarship. It was a natural fit for me. I saw the university as a space for debating and engaging ideas and inquiring about questions relevant to the social, cultural, economic, and, political realities that people experience in their daily lives.

There have been several ways that I have pulled from my experiences as a student and as a political activist. Over the past 14 years, as a member of the African American Master Artist in Residency Program (AAMARP) and an adjunct of the African American Studies Department at Northeastern University, I have hosted every year a get together for my students and their family and friends. The idea is to get them out of the classroom into a different environment to share food, conversations, music, and view the work of master artist. This has helped in building a sense of community in the classroom, getting students to feel more comfortable about engaging and sharing their thoughts about the ideas on sensitive topics, such as oppressed and oppressor contradictions at the intersectionality of race, class, and gender.

Another way that I have brought my activist sensibility into my pedagogy is by incorporating in my syllabus an Optional Community Action Project, where students can decide to participate in a community meeting and a community action or event. Instead of writing about the assigned essay, they can write about their experience with the community event. In taking the option, students are required to relate their community experience connecting it to ideas learned from the assigned class readings, class discussions, or films. Over the years, students have taken up the Optional Community Action Project by participating in such projects as: a trip to New York City at the 1199 union hall in a program on Assata Shakur; a community information and visibility campaign where they leafleted bus and train stations urging people to take a moment of silence and calling for peace and not war on April 4th, the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther Kings, Jr. assassination; a Green Ribbon campaign to support hurricane Katrina victims; and a campaign and Boston March that mobilized 3500 people calling for the city of Boston to declare December 1st Rosa Park Day in honor of her refusal to give up her seat in the front of the bus, defying the segregation laws of Alabama.

As an activist-scholar in Africana Studies that teaches a diverse population of students I have been able to create space for students to explore outside of the classroom. This has allowed students to participate, observe, discuss, and write about living ideas and relate them to theories and knowledge they learned in the course. Through this method, students bring and share knowledge to the class as well as learn from other students' experiences. From what I have learned from my students, engaging and getting them to connect their learning to their own experience can be transformative, just as it was for me during my youth. They often tell me that this method of engagement is different from what they experience in many of their other classes. That difference is something that I believe should not be apologized for, but should be recognized, and valued.

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