Teaching to Freedom Ride:
Classroom Management, Habits of Mind, and Social Activism as the Roles of an Educator

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Author Note
This paper was prepared for the Masters in Teaching program, Fall Quarter, taught by Professors Davies, Esposito, and Wiedenhaupt. Additionally, the reflection is on the last page of the paper.
Introduction

“I realized if you can change a classroom, you can change a community, and if you change enough communities you can change the world” (“Brainy Quote”, n.d.).

Erin Gruwell, noted for her work with teenagers in Long Beach, California—which in turn led to the compilation of a collection of first-hand student accounts known as The Freedom Writers Diary (1999)—was characterized as a successful teacher due to the way she influenced students’ learning and helped them find a creative outlet from which to escape the struggles and negative social stigma students endured on an almost daily basis. She gave them the hope to shoot for the moon, and even if they only landed among the stars, they would at least land somewhere further than they would have originally hoped. Her work resulted in a great achievement in the students’ learning community—especially in light of the Rodney King riots and that society as a whole had seemed to give up on these students. As one “freedom writer” put it, “Society just doesn’t care about young people anymore, even if we are the future” (“Erin Gruwell”, 1999, n.p.). In this day and age, there is a need for successful instructors to take on the ever-important work of teaching. Yet what exactly does it mean to be a “successful” teacher in this day and age? What roles and responsibilities would a successful teacher need to embody?

Countless theories and works have been written on the roles and responsibilities of being a teacher. Writers such as bell hooks (1994), Lisa Delpit (1995), and Maxine Greene (1973), among countless others, have offered their viewpoints on critical and practical pedagogy. Theorists such as hooks and H. Richard Milner (2010) have centered on the notion of race and ethnicity, while others like Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick (2013) focus on the crucial role that dispositions play into the school curriculum. Richard I. Arends (1997) stressed the importance of skillful classroom management in an educational setting, as well as the implementation of
different teaching styles to cater to different lessons and material. With such a diverse array of theory in circulation, is there one specific theory educators should cling to? The evidence indicates that even within the realm of theory, countless writers have synthesized the works of other professionals in the field of education to compile guidelines to teach by.

Theory, however, only forms part of what meaningful teaching practices entail. Nothing can compete with the experience of working first-hand in the field. The general public can speculate on what teaching entails; they see the teacher at work, they see the students learning, and they see test scores. Yet is this really all that teaching is? Were that the case, teaching would not be considered teaching; it would be considered speech-making. Anyone can stand on a soap box and preach one’s knowledge and findings to the world, regardless of the information or the world we live in. Not everyone, however, can teach. The profession comes with a myriad of roles and responsibilities that transgress the curriculum, that cut across racial and economic boundaries, that can empower and uplift the student to reach his/her full potential, and that can—as Erin Gruwell would say—change the world.

With this in mind, the primary roles and responsibilities of teaching, as posited in this paper, will focus on exercising classroom management, modeling constructive dispositions, and becoming an agent for change.

**Classroom Management**

Imagine walking into a classroom of pre-pubescent teenagers. Imagine that everyone in the room is talking loudly: the two girls sitting in the back corner do not stop giggling uncontrollably. The lone boy sitting in the front of the room has headphones in his ears. Three burly individuals surround a stereotypically skinny boy with thick glasses and braces, as they hold him up by the scruff of his neck and dangle him four inches off the ground. Comic books,
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newspapers, walled-up balls of paper, pencils, and pens litter the floor. Students wander in and out of the classroom at will and without warning, causing a disturbance in the hallway outside.

Could any learning possibly occur in such an environment?

Richard I. Arends (1997) would conclude that it would be possible. In his words, “Becoming a teacher involves learning to confront a complex work environment in which many activities are going on simultaneously” (p. 16). In an “ideal world,” according to the way teaching has historically been envisioned (Rury, 2005), students would remain quiet throughout the lecture, paying attention to the instructor while keeping distractions and talk to a minimum. This is, however, the opposite of what usually happens in a classroom today. Regardless of the fact that distractions and rowdiness can and will occur, it is important not to lose control and let the students go completely wild, as in this previous example of a raucous classroom. According to Arends (1997), the two primary roles of teaching are providing instruction and exerting leadership (p. 16), yet neither of these objectives can be met unless some sense of order is established in the classroom.

Countless educators have focused on management as their primary goal. They strived to achieve near-silence and optimal compliance with their lectures and course material (Rury, 2005). Historically, “there was a strong emphasis on obedience, discipline, and order, for the good of the school, for the good of the parents, and for the good of the children when they grew up” (Kaestle, 1983, p. 96). This idea of discipline was deeply embedded in teaching practices. However, Arends (1997) noted that “classroom management is not an end itself; it is merely one part of a teacher’s overall instructional and leadership role. It cannot be separated from the other functions of teaching” (p. 37). The educator’s primary goal is not solely management of the classroom, yet it becomes exceptionally difficult to teach in a classroom where classroom
management is lacking. Arends (1997) cited studies done at the University of Texas in the 1970s and 1980s; the studies found that classroom managers had clear procedures, handled conflict quickly, had clear work requirements, and gave clear presentations and explanations of the material to be covered (p. 39-40). Arends further noted that the most effective finding of these studies was that “teachers who establish smooth-running classrooms in the beginning of the year maintain them throughout the year. Those who get off to a bad start face troubles later on” (p. 40).

It appears that order and discipline, while not the ultimate goal of education, are vital responsibilities that educators must exercise to ensure that their classrooms run smoothly.

While early theorists stressed order and discipline, their focus seemed to lie with maintaining a silent, compliant environment in the classroom. Theorists such as Lev Vygotsky (Miller, 1989) would argue the contrary, stating that interpersonal communication and social interaction are crucial components in learning and development. “Much of development involves ‘meaning making’ as children try to make sense of their experiences and, through language, share these meanings with others in conversations and stories” (Miller, 1989, p. 215). Sociocultural learning enables students to work together to derive meaning, creating a learning experience that students can use in the world around them. Using personal experiences and reflecting on one’s own learning—as was demonstrated in The Freedom Writers Diary (1999) with the journal entries of students’ own lives—thus allows for a learning opportunity to occur within the context of a community.

Sociocultural learning theory was further illustrated in The Freedom Writers Diary (1999), in which the environment pits students against one another on the basis of race: “Latinos killing Asians. Asians killing Latinos…Now it all comes down to what you look like” (p. 10). Such animosity can carry over into the classroom, and can impede on students’ learning if they
are not willing to work with one another—or are more concerned with killing each other.

“Meaning making” (Miller, 1989, p. 215), in such an environment, could enable students to learn to collaborate as they come to grips with the gang-related violence ensuing in their lives. The diary thus served to bridge these gaps, and contributed to classroom management by creating an environment of understanding and respect—one that facilitated student learning. Communication was key to not only creating a more manageable learning environment, but to also transgressing racial boundaries and learning from other backgrounds. “They [students] form social connections with other people and draw on these social guides to aid their making sense of the world” (Miller, 1989, p. 215). In other words, effective learning cannot take place unless students actively communicate with one another.

One aspect of education is to encourage learning and independent thinking—not for students to become strictly compliant in an authoritative setting. Such an environment, Lisa Delpit (1995) claimed, would only perpetuate the status quo of social structure, a meritocratic dictatorship that leaves little room for creativity. Classroom management can still occur in a busy environment, and order can be maintained to encourage learning: “Classroom management demands vary according to the type of student activity being used: whole-group, small-group, or seatwork” (Arends, 1997, p. 41). Effective classroom management does not signify strict compliance and order, but instead serves as a way for educators to be clear on the objectives and goals for the lesson so that student learning can be maximized without compromising on time and energy that would otherwise be wasted through an “unmanaged” classroom. Creating a learning opportunity thus matters more than creating an environment of total compliance.
Modeling Dispositions

When asked what he considered to be the roles and responsibilities of a quality teacher, Ron Grinnell (2014), a math and science teacher at Choice Alternative High School in Shelton, Washington, first and foremost stated to “be a good role model.” When pressed further on the subject, Grinnell went on to say that within this role, teachers had the responsibility to “[treat] people with respect. If there’s nothing else I do here, I do that” (personal communication, November 13, 2014).

Observing his classroom, one cannot help but agree with him; many of the students at Choice Alternative High School come from a variety of backgrounds, with their own sets of issues and personal conflict. Almost daily, students and counselors work together to resolve issues and establish an environment of peace and respect. Posters all over the school and in each classroom, including Grinnell’s, reinforce the motto, “Affirmations, No Put-Downs.” This mentality of respect and positive criticism in education is taught with the hopes that the students themselves will come to be good citizens after leaving the school, regardless of what issues and problems they may face. In other words, the “what” of the lesson does not necessarily matter more than the “why” and the “how” of what is learned. Teachers’ responsibilities should not be test or curriculum-centered, but should encompass the overall well-being, growth, and personal development of the students (Milner, 2010). Although it can be difficult to unify the two goals, teaching in an encouraging environment that supports the development of dispositions can help to create better-rounded lesson plans, with the collaboration of other professionals. It is simply not enough to wish for students to develop on their own; dispositions must be practiced on a regular basis so that students will not only “talk the talk,” but will actually “walk the talk” (Costa & Kallick, 2013, p. 22).
Teachers themselves, according to Grinnell (2014), must model this very characteristic. Costa & Kallick (2013) stressed the need to teach dispositions and habits of mind in the classroom. "According to Wikipedia, a disposition is a habit, a preparation, a state of readiness, or a tendency to act in a specified way” (p. 19). Critical pedagogy, according to Costa & Kallick, is not solely limited to the teaching of new material, nor is it limited to the practices of effective classroom management. “[In the 1700s] the superintendent of public instruction in Illinois reiterated the main purpose of public schooling: “The chief end is to make GOOD CITIZENS [sic]” (Kaestle, 1983, p. 98). There is a need to teach students positive behaviors in the classroom—behaviors that will enable them to function and thrive in settings outside of academia. "Intelligent action in the world is what counts most. Knowledge of content is only a part of performance” (Costa & Kallick, 2013 p. 2). Indeed, when applying for a job and securing an interview, the individual’s knowledge of subject matter may count to a certain extent, but whether or not that individual is able to listen, be creative, and think independently is a different matter altogether. It would behoove an educator to teach a disposition such as listening: "Highly effective people spend an inordinate amount of time and energy listening. Some psychologists believe that the ability to listen to another person, to empathize with, and to understand their point of view is one of the highest forms of intelligent behavior” (Costa & Kallick, 2013, p. 69).

Acquiring constructive habits of mind can empower students to effect social change and inspire others. Zlata Filipovic (Gruwell, 1999) bore witness to the effects that Erin Gruwell had on her classroom. As Filipovic observed, Gruwell’s enthusiasm for writing was contagious, and her concern regarding the racial segregation occurring at the school led the students to read *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Gruwell stated, “I immediately decided to throw out my meticulously planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum” (p. 3). Gruwell wanted her
students to learn tolerance, writing habits, and open-mindedness because she understood that her students were to be active members in the world. Instead of killing each other, Gruwell wanted her students to work together, to become transformative intellectuals in their own community. As a result, “[t]hey chose to rid themselves of doing things the easy way, the way they’ve always been done, and chose to write, to create, to fight stereotypes and live up to the name of true Freedom Writers” (p. xiii).

The teacher’s role and responsibility is not merely limited to teaching habits of mind such as tolerance, listening, and communication skills; the responsibility extends to the teacher him/herself practicing and embodying these dispositions on a daily basis. bell hooks (1994) claimed that an educator’s role extends to self-actualization: "Progressive, holistic education, 'engaged pedagogy' is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p. 15). How else can educators be expected to empower students to become better citizens, if they themselves fail to strive for self-enhancement? It is not so much a question of one’s reputation and how they look as citizens; striving to learn can allow for educators to improve their teaching and be open to learn from students. In the words of Carl Jung, "If there is anything that we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is not something that could better be changed in ourselves” (Costa & Kallick, 2013, p. 46).
Agents for Change

*The Freedom Writers Diary* (1999) derived its name from the Freedom Riders—Civil Rights activists who rode in segregated buses in the 1960s, in the hopes of establishing a non-segregated society (Wikipedia, n.d.). The diary itself was a collection of personal narratives made by students living amidst massive gang activity in Long Beach, California. It seemed that little, if any, change would come to this neighborhood, were it not for the power of the written word and Erin Gruwell’s persistence in teaching these students. Even if change on a large-scale basis could not easily be achieved, at least within their own immediate communities Gruwell’s students could begin to foster the seeds of change. “Humans develop through their changing participation in the socio-cultural activities of their communities, which also change” (Rogoff, 2003, p. 11).

Like Erin Gruwell (1999), Paulo Freire (1998) stressed the need to be tolerant of differences in the classroom. Tolerance indicates an environment in which differences due to race, socioeconomic status, or gender will work to generate a world in which these differences can be understood. In Freire’s words, “Being tolerant does not mean acquiescing to the intolerable; it does not mean covering up disrespect; it does not mean coddling the aggressor or disguising aggression. Tolerance is the virtue that teaches us to live with the different. It teaches us to learn from and respect the different” (p. 210). Differences—and indeed, racism itself—will continue to exist in American society. It is up to the educator to change deficient mentality in students by teaching tolerance as a way of allowing students to make up their own minds about the way they perceive differences—with the desire that they will embrace these differences, and thus effect change. As Lisa Delpit (1995) stated, "We can continue to view diversity as a problem, attempting to force all differences into standardized boxes. Or we can recognize that
diversity of thought, language, and worldview in our classrooms cannot only provide an exciting educational setting, but can also prepare our children for the richness of living in an increasingly diverse national community” (p. 66). Diversity can provide learning opportunities in which, in Piaget’s cognitive terms, can cause disequilibrating moments through which learning occurs (Craine, 2005). By giving students opportunities to assimilate and accommodate new information, students can form new ideas about the world, reorganizing and reflecting on their own pre-existing ideas. There is no singular way of looking at a situation; such is the beauty of diversity and the mind. Diversity in thought, background, and social status will thus exist regardless of where students go, what they do, or who they know.

Teachers have the responsibility to be agents for change every time they interact with a student; they have the responsibility to inspire students to change the world around them, to imagine a brighter future where they themselves are the ones who will be responsible for such a transformation. “Change where it counts the most—in the daily interactions of teachers and students—is the hardest to achieve and the most important, but we are not pessimistic about improving the public schools” (Tyack, 1995, n.p.). Indeed, the educator must be a driving action for change; students are the future of the world, and they will be the ones to reinforce the status quo or challenge it. The educator’s responsibility is not merely to teach and inform; it is to connect, to question, to inquire, and to teach his/her students to do the same. In Erin Gruwell’s words, “Because teachers are planting seeds every day, with every lesson plan, with every part of our curriculum, they are change agents” (Morgan & Lock, 2014, p. 73).

Even though teachers may be inspired to empower students, the school system itself could indicate a meritocratic social structure that merely imitates society at large. Jay MacLeod (1987) noted that the school system, which favors the “haves” and often disregards the “have-
nots,” can often fail to empower students to envision a more equitable, just world. Maxine Greene (1973) claimed that the structure does not allow for freedom of expression; "Ivan Illich says that the institution of the school is, by definition, repressive" (p. 64). Lisa Delpit (1995) would even claim that schools have a tendency to reinforce a White-centered view of the world, without paying attention to the cultural needs of others. In spite of this bias that can repress efforts to teach across such boundaries, “teachers can make a difference even when they are operating in institutions and systems that do not support their passions and commitments to meeting the complex needs of all students” (Milner, 2010, p. 12). It takes positive habits of mind (Costa & Kallick, 2013) to be able to encourage students to engage in political thinking, and to encourage them to take action. In Milner’s (2010) words, “Systematic and broad-level change is ideal. Individual-level changes in mind-set and practices among teachers is a place to begin the journey in order to construct those moments that serve students as experiences they shall never forget” (p. 12).

How, then, does one go about effecting change? Simply put, "To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences” (bell hooks, 1994, p. 130). By addressing pre-existing issues, and by seeking to change deficit mentalities, teachers can take a first step towards making students aware of the inequalities that exist. Milner (2010) would even say it would be harmful not to address issues of race or socioeconomic status in the classroom, as it can perpetuate the “myth of meritocracy” (p. 28-33). After all, what good would it be to teach curriculum without also introducing ways in which students could utilize that curriculum in the real world? What use
does knowledge have in a corrupt world, if one does not use that knowledge? Knowledge without action might as well be considered dead.

In Milner’s (2010) words, “teaching is almost always a personal and political endeavor” (p. 106). The role of the teacher as an advocate and agent for social change is one that is fraught with difficulties. The school system is meritocratic by nature and, at times, reinforces the existing status quo through repressive acts and strategies. A teacher like Erin Gruwell encountered many difficulties in her quest to effect change; her students faced racial violence head-on. She needed to transgress socioeconomic boundaries to reach out to them—to prove to them that, in an era fraught with riots concerning race, and despite students’ racial and economic differences, change was, and is, always possible. As stated by Gruwell, “I believe that all students, when asked to be accountable for their actions and to be socially aware citizens, will become agents for change” (“Brainy Quote”, n.d.)!

**Conclusion**

The roles of an educator are thus expressed in the forms of executing effective classroom management, promoting positive habits of mind, and advocating for social change. Not one of these roles is necessarily more important than the others; all three work together in teaching. Theoretically it may be impossible to name every single role and responsibility that exists; each of these is unique to the individual, and the way it is made manifest varies depending on the setting, time, students, and teacher. What the educator teaches does indeed matter, but it is through the “how” of teaching in which the soul of education emerges to touch the lives of others.

Erin Gruwell found that her role as an educator was multi-faceted, and not merely limited to teaching classroom material. “Whether the examples of stories from the books Gruwell chose
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- such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* or the many other books Gruwell had them read - her students learned that there was power of not just one voice, but also a collective voice” (Morgan & Lock, 2014, p. 72). If the Freedom Writers have anything to teach the world, it is that classroom material forms only one part of education. The way in which curriculum is taught matters greatly when an educator encourages students to be the change they wish to see in the world. In the words of Oscar Kwageley, “The purpose of education is to learn to die satiated with life” (Delpit, 1994, p. 104); indeed, one must also learn to *live* satiated with life.
References


Grinnell, R. (2014, November 13). Roles and Responsibilities of a Teacher [Interview by A.C. Magana].


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Reflection

1) One of the changes I have made was including more information from sociocultural theory. I elaborated more on Vygotsky in the section related to Classroom Management. The change incorporates more of learning theory into the body of the paper, and ties it in with Erin Gruwell’s students in Long Beach. Another change I have made was to include more of Piaget’s theories, specifically assimilation and accommodation with learning about tolerance for other cultures. Piaget was included in the section about Agents for Change, thus this has strengthened my essay by incorporating learning theory into the implications for social change.

2) I am currently content with my essay, regardless of the length it has reached. I am still wondering about the ways in which I can implement Myles Horton, Paulo Freire, Yosso, and Jean Anyon into the body of my paper. However, I have reached the maximum length and would have rather gone more in-depth with the authors and theories I already provide. Perhaps, if I ever decide to publish this paper, I will seriously consider incorporating these and other theorists into a longer, more concise and comprehensive paper.

3) My favorite part of the essay has to do with the references I make to Erin Gruwell’s work in Long Beach. I find Gruwell to be a quintessential example of an educator who demonstrates the roles and responsibilities of being an effective, transformative educator. Reading The Freedom Writers Diary is a lesson in itself, because of the amount of primary sources available to educators and to students. There is only so much that a person could absorb from learning theory, but seeing vivid representations and specimens of the field make theory and pedagogy come to life. Here is living proof that an educator can change a community, can touch the lives of others. Not everyone can be an Erin Gruwell, but many people can be classroom managers, proponents of dispositional thinking, and advocates for change.