



Critical Teaching: Reflections on a Day of Teaching Precariously

By Carla Barrett, John Jay College

The day after it was announced that the Staten Island Grand Jury would not indict Officer Daniel Pantaleo in the chokehold death of Eric Garner, I was scheduled to teach Juvenile Delinquency. The plan, according to my well-structured syllabus, was to discuss the important role that Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) programs can play in responding to youthful offending within a retributive system. As I rode the subway that morning to John Jay College – lesson plan complete – I was still having a hard time getting my head around the Garner decision. There was video footage after all. And this was NYC. I had hoped my city would get it right. I was surprised, yet not surprised, and that made me angry. I thought about all the issues surrounding the decision and the growing movement building across the country after Ferguson. I thought of all the families who shouldn't have had to bury Black sons.

Leaving the subway I walked past a newsstand and saw the different ways that New York's top newspapers had chosen to cover the decision:

New York Officer Facing No Charges in Chokehold Case (New York Times)

It Was Not a Crime (New York Post)

We Can't Breathe (Daily News)

Most of my students don't read old-fashioned newspapers so I decided an impromptu lesson in media representations using these papers might be in order. I bought five of each of the newspapers and headed off to campus. My plan was to truncate our discussion of ATIs and end class with students working in groups to examine the different narrative constructions in the three papers. This, I thought, would be my contribution to the discussions my students – Criminology majors, Criminal Justice majors, Forensic Psychology majors, Police Studies majors – would be having in their other classes around the Brown and Garner cases.

At the beginning of class I decided to check to see what students had been talking about in other classes to make sure my newspaper exercise would offer something new.

"So are you talking about the Garner case in your other classes?" I asked. Almost all the students shook their heads "no." Since not a lot of time had passed since the news hit, I followed up with, "okay, but you've been talking about the Michael Brown case in your classes, right?" Again several students shook their heads and said, "No" or "Not really." I knew many of my colleagues had started discussions about Ferguson in their classes, but maybe not as many as I had thought.

I had not started a discussion in my classes after the Brown decision. I had felt our in-class tasks on that day were too important to preempt and I assumed other professors would be leading such discussions. In honest hindsight I wonder if I might not have been avoiding it because I didn't quite know how to start, where to start, or how not to let my own personal feelings take over a discussion.

"So, do you want to talk about it?" I asked the class. Nearly all of my students said "yes" with an urgency that took me aback. I asked why they thought many of their professors hadn't discussed it in class more. Students offered explanations about having other things to do during class and the simple fact that the topic might be too controversial, too volatile.

"It is controversial isn't it?" I admitted. "It can feel really dangerous." I acknowledged how difficult it can be to talk about controversial topics, how difficult it often is to talk about race and racism, how many professors and students don't feel equipped to discuss such things. The majority of my students are non-white and represent a rich array of cultures and languages. I am white.

"I'll admit," I said, "it feels a little precarious for me to stand here saying these things, right now. I'm not sure how people will respond. What if I say something wrong? What if people start yelling? Some people feel that if you start talking about race, you'll sound racist. It can be really hard to do this. But I think we have to try. These things are too important. And this isn't just some college anywhere; this is the John Jay College of *Criminal Justice*, in *New York City*. I mean, we have an *obligation* to be talking about this, don't you think?" The students agreed. I asked them: "So what do we need to talk about?" I no longer had a lesson plan or road map. I had no idea where we would go or where we would end up. Students started asking questions – about how grand juries work and about prosecutorial discretion and power and about how the justice system could seem so unjust to so many. When I didn't have answers I said so. I brought in sociology and critical criminology themes when I thought they could be useful. I asked them to share their opinions and their experiences. One Latina student who planned to join the NYPD upon graduation spoke of her frustrations with people who sought to demonize all cops, to demonize the profession to which she was dedicated. Another student discussed her experiences being out in the street protests that had taken place the night before.

We discussed good cops and bad cops and racist cops and the complex role of cops of color and larger issues of policing within the structural context of a racist society in the age of criminalization and militarization. We discussed protesters' rights and the role of social movements in forging change. We discussed the historical roots of the fear of the Black Male. Our discussions went this way and that. Some ideas were better developed and others got totally lost. It was random and unstructured. People voiced opinions and frustrations and fears and they didn't always agree with one another, yet they remained civil with one another.

In the last few minutes I had students get into small groups to examine the newspapers I had purchased. Some groups dug into the "narrative construction" exercise I had laid out while others talked about other things that were important to them in that moment. I didn't try to bring them back to task like I normally might have. In this class, on this day, it was clear that our "task" had been simply to try to create a space for dialogue – even potentially precarious dialogue – about difficult and important things that mattered to all of us in a city, in a society, confronting legacies

of oppression and definitions of justice. At the end of the class several students personally thanked me for the discussion. They had needed it. So had I. We had all needed a place, a space to dialogue about difficult things.

My students never did learn about the important role of ATIs in responding to youthful offending last semester, but something important happened and we were all better for it. Precarious as it may have felt in the moment, upon reflection I will always be grateful for what my students reminded me on that day: It is okay to not know where class is headed, or even what needs to be learned. It is okay to abandon the plan. It is okay, indeed necessary, for me to be painfully honest and fully human with my students. It is okay, indeed necessary, to allow precariousness – because the precarious stuff is often the most critical. Our work as professors is vital in ways far beyond learning outcomes and course outlines. As bell hooks has written:

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (*Teaching to Transgress*, 1994, p. 207)

