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Promoting Social Change through Higher Education

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In his *JAC* article, "Teaching for Social Justice: Reeducating the Emotions Through Literary Studies," Mark Bracher questions the ability of educators to promote positive social justice. In particular, he analyzes 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 the failure to promote social change effectively is the fact that many contemporary academics have a fear of imposing a morality on 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 moral idea that one should avoid moralizing.

It is important to point out that Bracher is not promoting a turn to a more ethical or 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 ethical and moral beings. In other words, educators put such a high value in their own self-perception of being morally pure that they end up teaching in an unethical way.

Central to Bracher's overall argument, which is elaborated in more detail in his 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 nonaction)" (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 his point that we do not have any strong theories to explain how this mode of progressive education could work 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.

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.

Bracher's alternative strategy turns to the idea that a pedagogy of compassion and sympathy should 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 begin to have problems with his central argument. Instead of seeing compassion and sympathy as the source for the solution, I see these often privatized emotions as a major source of the problem. For I would argue that what our students need to learn, and what they have often not been taught, is the need for collective action and collective consciousness. Furthermore, 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 towards aspects of human subjectivity that are most often perceived from an individualistic perspective.

One could claim that our new media culture offers unlimited opportunities to be compassionate in relationship to the suffering of strangers. In fact, many of my students have been highly affected by the recent events in Darfur, and some have even sent money and volunteered time to help prevent suffering in this horrific tragedy 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.

While affect plays a strong role in these libertarian beliefs, I do not believe that a heightened sense of compassion or sympathy will make these students more socially conscious. For everything in their world has been shaped by the privatization of the social and the public, and sentimental literary education may only help to provide more effective psychological tools for the individualization of experience.
As an example of why I do not think that compassion plays a key in the promotion of positive social change, I want to reflect briefly on my experience as a faculty union president and political activist. In virtually all of the important battles I have recently fought, I have had to defend people whom I do not like or respect. For instance, in a grievance case on which I have worked recently, 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 counter-transference, I believe that the main reason why we need to understand the roles of emotions in our subjectivity is to learn how to acknowledge and learn from these affective elements. I am not saying that we should repress or deny emotions; rather, I am asking that we learn how to work with them and not let them control us. In all activities, affects are important sources of information; however, they can never be the only sources for positive social change.

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 who is responsible for suffering affects our ability to give others sympathy.

Bracher describes the situation where a customer gives a server a low tip because the customer feels the server has been unresponsive and inattentive (475). The customer then finds out that the server's four-year-
old daughter had 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 towards 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 servers based on their individual performance, until I found out that most servers 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 important 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. How can he try to get students to see that people are not primarily responsible for their problems, when he wants his students to become responsible for how they respond to other people’s suffering? He stresses the social and environmental when he is discussing the root cause of social issues; however, 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 new 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.

In his discussion of cognitive schemas, Bracher offers a more
nuanced and complex theory of affect that helps us to understand the multi-causal 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)

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 multi-causal 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 multi-layered 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 domestic farmers to produce crops at an artificially cheap rate. Most Americans probably believe that we 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 US 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 twenty-five-year campaign by both Republicans and Democrats, a large number of US 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 by definition are 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, and so forth. 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; instead, we need people to understand their own roles in larger social systems. 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.
On many levels, Bracher believes that the study of literature can use more complex causal models and schemas 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 benefit from the use of a more psychoanalytic perspective. Much of Bracher’s 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. To Bracher’s credit, he does offer several suggestions for 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 freewriting assignments and online chat discussions to get students to address their unconscious investments in a nonthreatening environment. Also students can relate their literary interpretations to their analyses of their own dreams and fantasies. In turn, this very individualistic-sounding mode of analysis can be combined with the learning of the types of systemic knowledge that I have been pointing to throughout this article.

Ultimately, 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, while we may all need to learn how to be more sympathetic towards the targets of our moral
stigmatization, we also need to affirm the role of each individual in perpetuating destructive social systems of injustice. Giving sympathy to the devil may prevent us from realizing that the devil is in the details.

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Works Cited


Rhetoric and Service-Learning

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In “Teaching for Social Justice: Reeducating the Emotions through Literary Study,” Mark Bracher elucidates quite eloquently the central anxiety that has haunted me—and, I suspect, many of my colleagues—for quite some time, and most acutely in recent years. Bracher asks, in short, what is the value of what we do? More broadly, academic humanists have increasingly embraced over the last three or four decades certain frameworks such as feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and postcolonialism that seek explicitly to promote social justice and alleviate human suffering by delineating the complex forces that supersede and even overwhelm individuals in the creation of social problems—and yet the dominant movement among government officials in this same period has increas-