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Teaching As A Subversive Act

Level: [Professional Development \(/category/level/professional-development\)](#)

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An education professor confronts California's mandated reading curriculum and invites his student-teachers to expand beyond the scripts.

I teach language arts to new teachers at a state university in the greater Los Angeles area. I've been teaching for 27 years, have presented hundreds of literacy seminars around the world, have published children's stories, written award-winning curricula and was invited by Phi Delta Kappa International to write and edit a book titled Teaching Reading Through Balanced Literacy

Let's just say I know what I'm doing when I teach strategies about comprehension skills to teachers of grades 4 to 8.

Or do I?

Sometimes, my students are less than sure; what they hear in our class is very different from what they see in their schools. My students are new teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which has mandated the [Open Court](#) (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/OpenCourtReadingProgram/>) reading series, a highly scripted curriculum with lots of de-contextualized skills practice that "supports" testing.

The teachers in my classes relish the student-centered literacy strategies I model and appreciate the academic rigor behind them. The pressures of No Child Left Behind mandates (and how their schools have chosen to respond to them) always meter my students' enthusiasm, however -- even though the strategies actually complement the Open Court curriculum.

This semester, one of my students, whom I'll call Luke, was the first to speak out about the conflict, one that arises without fail in every class I teach.

"Um, Jeff, this is great and all," Luke began. "But what about the master teacher who supervises me and forbids anything but scripts from Open Court?"

As I had many times before, I broke my student-teachers into small groups and asked them to brainstorm a list of things they felt might obstruct implementation of the literacy strategies we were learning. We discussed their concerns as a whole class, and then I invited them to try at least one strategy and come back the next week ready to share their experiences.

Within 24 hours, I received an email from Luke:

I'm the one who approached you with the Open Court question during class last night. You nearly made me cry today! One of our school's 4th-grade teachers was absent today and they sent 7 of her students over to me so I could work with them.

Since they were on a different (Open Court) story than our class, my master teacher had me work

with them in the back of the classroom. I was taken a bit by surprise, and so I tried everything you modeled to us last night. I did a shared reading of the story, and then the students and I did a retelling. We sequenced the story, split up the storyline and I had them do some art first, just like you showed us in class. We read our rough drafts and when we ran out of time, I suggested we finish it tomorrow. No! They wanted to take it home for homework! Throughout the entire next day they were like, "Alright, more work! Yeah!"

I couldn't believe my eyes. They beat me into the room after recess, and, when I arrived, they already had pencils in their hands and were working on their writing! When I read their work, it blew me away because it was infinitely better than most writing that they don't have any emotional connection to. We read our story and compared it to the Open Court version and it was good, man! I was definitely emotional!

Thank you,

Luke

I, like Luke, was very excited and replied to him, asking that he bring some of his students' work to our class, with their permission. I closed my email by saying, "Teaching is a subversive act."

Sustaining Subversive-ness

Most teachers understand that, whatever the issue is, if we're in a public school system, almost every choice we make is a political one. Stick to the proscribed curricula? Political, yet safe. Add to the scripted materials? Political, and less safe.

Luke's journey into resistance began when his master teacher was too busy to monitor his work. This sudden freedom to try out new strategies away from Big Brother's watchful eye resulted in a literacy experience that was explosive and emotional for him -- and for the students with whom he worked.

Of course, starting this journey and sustaining it are two different things. Sustaining our selves as subversive change agents means remembering that we don't need to go it alone.

A simple Google search will deliver Luke and his Los Angeles colleagues to [Emma Educator: A Radical Website Primarily for LAUSD Teachers](http://www.emmaeducator.info/index.php) (<http://www.emmaeducator.info/index.php>). Assuming visitors are willing to wade through the enormous number of porn links posted by spammers, they will discover an online community of educators grounded in resistance. One participant in the forum, for example, recently shared, "Literature Circles are so important for kids! The thing is that I feel like I have to sneak implementing this in my classroom. It feels like I'm committing a subversive act against the government."

Whether we want to [embrace student-centered teaching practices](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/resources/horace/v22/22_2_toc.html) (http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/resources/horace/v22/22_2_toc.html), [resist English-only policies](http://www.nabe.org/advocacy.html) (<http://www.nabe.org/advocacy.html>), [oppose overuse of standardized tests](http://www.fairtest.org) (<http://www.fairtest.org>), [advocate for the safety of queer children](http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home/index.html) (<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home/index.html>) or [challenge gender inequities](http://www.ncwge.org/) (<http://www.ncwge.org/>) in schooling, others share our commitment to social justice, and we must connect with them. Along with Google, Teaching Tolerance's [social justice group map](http://www.tolerance.org/maps/social_justice/index.html) (http://www.tolerance.org/maps/social_justice/index.html) is a place to start and continue the journey.

As Bell Hooks reminds us, students are served best when classrooms are filled with "active participant[s], not passive consumer[s]. Education as the practice of freedom ... connects the will to know with the will to become."

Educators, like our students, "become" in the context of community -- and, when we do, we will dare to discover the voices and interests of ourselves and our students by reaching beyond scripted lives.

Related activities:

- [In Search of Balance \(/activity/search-balance\)](/activity/search-balance)
- [Reading Between the Bubbles: A Three-Part lesson \(/activity/reading-between-bubbles-three-part-lesson\)](/activity/reading-between-bubbles-three-part-lesson)
- [Testing, Tracking, and Toeing the Line: A Role Play \(/activity/testing-tracking-and-toeing-line-role-play\)](/activity/testing-tracking-and-toeing-line-role-play)
- [How Stereotypes Undermine Test Scores \(/activity/how-stereotypes-undermine-test-scores\)](/activity/how-stereotypes-undermine-test-scores)
- [The Emotion Map \(/magazine/number-17-spring-2000/emotion-map\)](/magazine/number-17-spring-2000/emotion-map)
- [I Will Be Your Friend \(/kit/i-will-be-your-friend\)](/kit/i-will-be-your-friend)
- [The Philosopher's Stone \(/activity/philosophers-stone\)](/activity/philosophers-stone)
- [A Journal Can Be Anything \(/activity/journal-can-be-anything\)](/activity/journal-can-be-anything)

[Printer-friendly version \(/print/activity/teaching-subversive-act\)](/print/activity/teaching-subversive-act)



You might also like:

- ["Your Child Will Be Placed in Level ..." \(/blog/your-child-will-be-placed-level\)](/blog/your-child-will-be-placed-level)
- [Reading Between the Bubbles: A Three-Part lesson \(/activity/reading-between-bubbles-three-part-lesson\)](/activity/reading-between-bubbles-three-part-lesson)
- [The Emotion Map \(/magazine/number-17-spring-2000/emotion-map\)](/magazine/number-17-spring-2000/emotion-map)
- [Bring Back Teachers as Individuals, and Systems That Support Them \(/blog/bring-back-teachers-individuals-and-systems-support-them\)](/blog/bring-back-teachers-individuals-and-systems-support-them)
- [In Search of Balance \(/activity/search-balance\)](/activity/search-balance)