

# RISKY BUSINESS: MALCOLM X, STUDENT- CENTERED LEARNING AND *ETHOS*

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Last year a fellow came up to me after a workshop presentation and shook my hand. "I really admire the way you try to get students to teach themselves. Seems like it would be pretty frustrating, but I think it's great you're willing to try."

That kind of semi-compliment makes me very nervous. It's like someone saying, "Boy, I really admire the way you wrestle alligators. I'm not dumb enough to try it, but I think it's really exciting that you do it."

The fellow is right. Persuading students to become more involved in their own learning is risky business. It is frightening to students and is sometimes threatening to teachers. Knoblauch and Brannon's description of a student-centered classroom is instructive:

Teaching in the context of modern rhetoric involves fewer absolutes, less teacher control, and more student involvement. It's collaborative rather than authoritarian, so that the signs of authority . . . pass from view . . . [and] the signs of collaboration take their place. . . . (102)

Clearly, it's time for those of us who use a writing workshop approach to come clean. Admit that we feel we do our best work as teachers when we stand back and watch. Confess that we feel trapped when we are asked to pick a textbook or make up a

syllabus. Say aloud that our proudest moments as teachers come when students look up from their groups and say, "We can do this by ourselves, thanks."

We also need to stress that student-centered learning doesn't mean giving up our responsibility as teachers. It does mean making students become more responsible for their educations and that can be frustrating. First, students need to be convinced that they are capable of teaching themselves. They can't, however, be forced into such an enterprise. "Students are not coerced . . . but are encouraged . . . to take . . . imaginative and intellectual risks . . . . Encouraging students to take responsibility for their thinking carries with it an expectation that they will do so . . ." (Knoblauch and Brannon, 112).

Encouraging them is the tricky part because encouragement means persuasion, and persuasion is dependent upon *ethos*. The thing we as composition teachers tend to forget in the discussions about writing across the curriculum, primary trait analysis, protocol analysis, syntax checkers, or intertextuality is that teaching is a *rhetorical act*. When we attempt to persuade students, we are engaging in rhetoric. Alas, often they remain unconvinced or unmoved. I submit that a possible reason for their failure is the failure of the teacher's argument. As Michael Halloran points out, "When speaker and audience inhabit the same world, it is sufficient that both attend to the argument. But when speaker and audience inhabit different worlds, it becomes possible for speaker and audience to hear without listening" (627). Clearly, most of us don't inhabit the world of 18- and 19-year-olds. Even those of us who have teenagers of our own will be the first ones to testify that often our words to them go unheard. In both cases, I think it is perhaps a failure of *ethos* rather than theory or even pedagogy. Halloran claims that "the problem is one of existential commitment to the implications of an argument or more simply of the seriousness with which one takes an argument" (626). Certainly, not all students take seriously the argument that they are capable of teaching themselves and, though I don't know about you, right off hand I remember very few students with whom I shared an "existential commitment" to anything.

If we are to persuade students to take responsibility for their own thinking, writing and learning, then it must be through an understanding of *ethos*. *Ethos* is really what the student-centered

writing workshop is all about. It is the responsibility of the instructor to create an atmosphere that will encourage students to educate themselves. They need to be persuaded that their time is well-spent and that their efforts in peer editing, discussion, and revision are worthwhile and will lead to greater intellectual independence. In order to do this, we must convince them of our goodwill and trustworthiness. If you want to get 18- and 19-year-old students to accept responsibility for their own education, you must have some measure of cooperation and a certain amount of their trust. (Notice the vagueness of the words "some measure" and "certain amount." A pinch and a dash will do just as well). Getting their cooperation and trust can be tricky, though. Students in a writing class are often a suspicious bunch. Navigating around their distrust and steering clear of their cynicism can be every bit as risky as piloting a boat through dangerous shoals. That's why student-centered classrooms are risky business. They're messier. Trickier. Different.

What makes them different is that classrooms in which students are expected to collaborate and teach themselves violate the expectations of students who have been nourished on a strict lecture diet. This lecture diet may have been standard fare in their high school English classes. Therefore, students coming into a freshman writing class are usually very dependent learners. They come on the first day of class with their spiral notebooks and look up, pen poised over their paper, waiting to take down whatever The Teacher says. Many times they look baffled when I tell them that I have nothing to say but that I'm very interested in what THEY have to say. They don't think of themselves as having anything meaningful to write about and, in fact, resist my initial attempts to assure them that they do. Not surprisingly, many are wary and some are even embittered. Thus, they need to be persuaded that language is power and that they are capable of teaching themselves much of what they need to know about writing and language and power. I became convinced of these things one semester while I was trying, without much initial success, to show my students the effects of a powerful *ethos* and the consequences of self-education. I had them read Malcolm X's autobiography, an idea I borrowed from William Coles. This particular semester I had an unusually resistant group of students. Initially, they loathed Malcolm X's autobiography. Later on, their attitude softened, and

they merely hated it. One of the things that made them the angriest was his claim about copying the dictionary while he was in prison. The assignment I gave them contained Malcolm X's account of his frustration "at not being able to express what I wanted to convey . . ."

In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there—I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn't articulate, I wasn't even functional. How would I sound writing in slang, the way I would say it, something such as, 'Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat. (172)

Malcolm X also details his sense of wonder and fascination of what he "learned of people and places and events from history" (173). Near the end of the passage he asserts that "Between what I wrote in my tablet, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison, I would guess I wrote a million words" (173).

I asked them if they were persuaded that his claim was true. Why did they believe him, or if they didn't believe him, why didn't they? Were they familiar with the feeling of not being able to say what they wanted to say? Did they ever feel, like Malcolm X, that their language wasn't good enough?

While some of them hemmed and hawed and said maybe he did and maybe he didn't, how would we ever really know for sure, a goodly number of them stated unequivocally that they did not believe him, and even those who did denied that anyone could get an education from copying a dictionary. (I did not find this reaction puzzling from a group of rich, white, young people whose parents were paying a great deal of money for their education and who were probably reminded of the fact every so often). Most agreed that copying a dictionary wasn't a remarkable feat. It certainly didn't qualify as an education. It was just copying. Anybody could do it. Most ignored the question of whether they were ever frustrated by not being able to express what they wanted to say.

So I had them copy one page from a standard-sized dictionary by hand with a pencil—no typing or Xeroxing—just like Malcolm X said he had done. I instructed them to bring the result to class so I could look at it.

I believe it was at this point that they began to transfer some

of their anger at Malcolm X, who, after all, was dead and couldn't defend himself, to the instructor, who was, at least for the moment, alive and a more deserving object for their anger. I became aware of this shift in their feelings during the ensuing class discussion about what they had learned from the experience of copying one page of the dictionary. "A complete waste of time," "Well, you're the teacher but . . .," and "What has this got to do with English?" were some of the gentlest comments. At this point, I decided that perhaps having them write about the experience would be more useful than talking about it.

Consequently, I had them write a paper about their dictionary copying. The assignment asked them to think about language and power. I reminded them that Malcolm X, black and barely literate, saw language as the avenue to power. Copying the dictionary was the only way he saw to educate himself and thus, to free himself. What about it? Could one "become" something else through words? Is language, or could it be, a road to power? What, if anything, had they learned from copying the dictionary?

Some were craftier than others. These students copied the last page of the Z's. Others were not so sly, but nearly all of them allowed that they had learned something—a new word or concept, though most were not very gracious about admitting it. "Okay, so I learned what xenophobic means. So it's possible to learn something from copying the dictionary. So Malcolm X knew a lot of big words. He could even use them in a sentence. So what?" Or, more to the point: "Couldn't we write about something more interesting? Like music or literature?"

Frankly, I was just about ready to cave in and move on to something else, so weary was I of their resistance and complaints. But then one of my colleagues brought me a record of Malcolm X's speeches—set to rap music. It was a remarkable record. Malcolm X's voice—hard, powerful, angry, shrill at times—spoke the words that they'd been reading about and had told me they were sick of. "I've got a plate in front of me but nothing is on it. Uh, because all of us are sitting at the same table, are all of us diners? I'm not a diner until you let me dine. Then I become a diner." The words jumped and danced to the rhythmic, street-beat so characteristic of rap. "There will be no skullduggery, no flim flam, no compromise, no sell out, no controlled show."

I played it for them. They listened. They asked me to play

it again. I did. Then I handed them a copy of the lyrics and the following questions:

Why do you suppose there is a record of Malcolm X speeches set to rap music? Why rap? Why would anyone take the time to make a record like this? What's the connection between the music and the message? When you write this paper, draw on what you know about Malcolm X already. You will also want to read up on "rap music". It will help you figure out the relationship between the music and the message.

Maybe it was the music or maybe the full force of Malcolm X's *ethos* gripped them when they finally heard his voice. But the tone of the papers changed from querulous whining to—well, lots of things. One student wrote: "There was poor Malcolm X, could barely read and write, copying the dictionary in his tablet. He was in prison. Here I am, a college freshman attending college, sitting in my dorm room with Iron Maiden posters on the wall, money in my pocket, my new Honda parked outside. Am I in prison too?" Some talked about the immediacy of hearing the man's voice: "Before I thought this Malcolm X guy was some kind of scam artist. All that stuff about copying the dictionary was just to get us to believe that he wasn't really a criminal after all. He wanted us to think he was a scholar. But once I heard the record, really heard his voice, it made a difference. It wasn't just words on paper anymore." One student talked about the music and the message. "The two go together somehow. Rap music is a sort of rebellion away from middle of the road white music. I know the black guys in my dorm listen to it and it makes them get even cooler than they already are. Malcolm X's speeches sort of scare me the way the rap music and the black guys in my dorm scare me. They don't really scare me. It's just that I feel intimidated." Some of them went beyond the rap music-speech issue: "I think I get it now. It doesn't really matter whether Malcolm X copied the dictionary or not. The point is he got people to believe he did. He wanted black people to take responsibility for themselves and stop relying on white people for everything. To stop being "niggers" and start being black people. He couldn't go to college, so he did the one thing he could do—copy a dictionary." One student went way beyond the immediate issue and wrote an excruciating paper about the way the music of Pink Floyd finally

gave her the courage to tell her mother that her stepfather had been molesting her. "The words to Pink Floyd's 'The Wall' talk about being 'comfortably numb' but I wanted to be alive again. Not numb. Language is powerful, I guess. I became something else after I told my mother. I stopped being a victim."

The Malcolm X assignments were risky. They exposed students to a powerful, compelling *ethos* and to the notion that all real education is self-education. Students and teacher risked something. Accepting responsibility for their own learning is unnerving for students; it can even make them peevish. Thus, we need to acknowledge their courage as they make progress toward achieving intellectual independence, because that's what writing workshops are all about.

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