Chapter 6
Tracing the Trope of Teaching as Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Transformation, or change on the part of the student, is the intended outcome of all learning situations, but at times this trope is taken too far. By considering how narratives of transformation too often fail to account for agency and complexity in student identity, this chapter answers Boler’s call for interrogations of entrenched belief systems that inform educational practices. Taking American composition pedagogies as its example, the chapter calls attention to the limitations in pedagogies that render students “other” in the teacher’s commitment to social change, proposing that portraying students as incomplete beings in need of transformation could reinforce misguided beliefs that hinder student/teacher interactions. The chapter then closes by encouraging educators to recognize student development as a process, and one that need not lead to beliefs that parallel those of the teacher.

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Composition’s Dependence upon Critical Pedagogies

It was not until the 1980s that journals in composition studies devoted sustained attention to feminist ideals (Kirsch, Maor, Massey, Nickson-Massey, & Sheridan Rabideau, 2003, p. 5) and yet as early as 1992, Gore called for new assessments of feminist praxis, noting that “Because of their roots in specific liberatory and emancipatory political projects, we might be least likely to question the claims to empowerment of the critical and feminist discourses” (p. 54). And yet, although few would argue that those engaging in radical pedagogies do so for questionable reasons, the fact that their outcomes may indeed be questionable should prompt us to interrogate these practices.
more closely - and interrogated they have been, quite thoroughly by this point. Despite their well-known critiques, these pedagogies continue to exert significant influence in composition theory and practice. Yoon (2005) argued that the large body of work criticizing these pedagogies notwithstanding, composition studies continues to cling to them:

Despite critiques of critical pedagogy’s limitations [...] composition scholarship continues to show signs of its attachment to so-called emancipatory goals articulated by and attributed to critical pedagogy. Even if left with few concrete strategies to fulfill this vision, we seem to be, at the very least, reluctant to surrender these laudatory “social visions” of change, justice, transformation, and democracy. (p. 717)

Though Yoon’s article focused on critical pedagogies’ construction of teachers, not students, her observations reveal a need for renewed scrutiny where critical composition pedagogies are concerned. Taking up where Yoon left off, I study historically situated pedagogical accounts and their subsequent critiques to inquire into how feminist composition pedagogies (FCPs) construct students. Time and again, this inquiry revealed references to student transformation, and though methods for achieving it may have changed over the years, it remains present in writings informed by feminism’s goals for teaching.

In the pages that follow, I focus on how both early FCPs and more recent accounts of service-learning initiatives rely on the trope of transformation. Some may consider it odd to connect feminist pedagogies with service-learning, yet as Kirsch et al. (2003) noted, “in recent years feminism has become ‘mainstreamed’ in composition studies” (p. 2), and thus we no longer encounter as many publications overtly labeled “feminist pedagogy,” despite the fact that feminist ideals remain. Boler (1999), too, was concerned that feminist pedagogies and recognition of their contributions were disappearing (pp. 108-109), and she called for inquiries into cases in which feminist methods are employed without being labeled as feminist (p. 112). Current composition scholarship concerned with bridging the gap between communities and universities proves a particularly rich site for contemporary references to feminist ideals. Thus, I answer Boler’s call by turning to contemporary service-learning accounts to determine how the trope of transformation, a central tenet of FCPs, continues to play out in composition studies’ narratives of student identity.

Throughout the chapter, I draw from various scholars’ evaluations of critical pedagogies to illustrate how, in their attempt to promote the political agendas of feminism, many FCPs actually posited a limited conception of student identity, presenting all students as though they were in need of saving. The chapter further delineates how this entrenched conversion narrative has relied not only on a limited view of students but also on an exalted view of the feminist pedagogue’s responsibilities. The publications cited herein range from some of composition studies’ earliest feminist scholarship, dating back to the early 1970s, to works published as recently as 2007. By providing readers with these varied accounts, I trace both the trope of transformation and its attendant criticism as each relates to constructions of student identity, explaining how the concept of transformation has itself been transformed even as it continues to (in)form the ways teachers and students interact in the composition classroom.

“YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?”: HOW FEMINIST PEDAGOGIES WANTED TO CHANGE THE WORLD

I take as my starting point Bauer’s (1990/2003) “The Other ‘F’ Word” because Bauer, unlike many of her peers, stated explicitly her objective to convert students to the cause of feminism and