Pedagogy of the Pissed: 
Punk Pedagogy in the First-Year Writing Classroom

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The day I opened my mailbox and saw a lead CCC article called “Never Mind the Tagmemics: Where’s the Sex Pistols” (CCC 48.1, February 1997, pp. 9-29), I thought I was dreaming. During my time as a student and teacher of composition, I have been thinking almost continually about ways to use punk ideology and energy in a composition course. Geoffrey Sirc opens up pedagogical space for this ideology. He surveys the history of folk/utopian-dreamy pedagogy; he shows how that pedagogy abandoned its connection to popular culture in the late 1970s; he calls for the inclusion of punk ideology in our classrooms. Unfortunately, his article stops just when my interest peaks. He stops short of offering any vision of what a punk pedagogy or classroom would look like. While I certainly can’t claim to offer a definitive version of a punk pedagogy, I do want to offer up some ideas for why we might develop one. In doing so, I hope to elevate punk discourse to a level beyond its commonly assigned rabble-rousing.

Two questions beg discussion before really delving into any talk about punk teaching. First, what is punk ideology? Second, why does it have any place in the academy? Trying to define and explicate punk ideology is certainly problematic. There is no Platonic ideal of “punkness” from which we can extract a definition. Punk, during its lifespan as a recognized, named subculture, has changed a great deal. Gone are the days when a call for action like “Anarchy in the UK” could be a number one hit; such political rallying cries have been replaced by “Rape Me,” “Basket Case,” and other cries of pain and anguish, self-loathing, and hate. Is this what we want to teach our students?
Well, no. My contention, however, is that there are still some common characteristics between what my students call “old-school” punk and the neo-punk of today. These characteristics, modified so that we can maintain some civility in our classrooms, might provide a philosophical direction useful in guiding us to a new kind of course, one in which we teach critical discourse that is more proactive than deconstructive. From my own research into and experience with punk subcultures and ideologies, I deduce the following principles of “punk”:

1. The Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethic, which demands that we do our own work because anybody who would do our work for us is only trying to jerk us around;
2. A sense of anger and passion that finally drives a writer to say what’s really on his or her mind;
3. A sense of destructiveness that calls for attacking institutions when those institutions are oppressive, or even dislikable;
4. A willingness to endure or even pursue pain to make oneself heard or noticed;
5. A pursuit of the “pleasure principle,” a reveling in some kind of Nietzchean chasm.

I’m not advocating a full-blown, anarchistic, self-mutilating classroom where students scarify themselves. Instead, I’m advocating a classroom where students learn the passion, commitment, and energy that are available from and in writing; where they learn to be critical of themselves, their cultures, and their government—that is, of institutions in general; and, most importantly, where they learn to go beyond finding out what’s wrong with the world and begin making it better. The punk classroom helps them move from being passive consumers of ideology to active participants in their cultures. Along the way, they may have to deconstruct the realities they’ve brought with them, but the focus of the pedagogy is on constructing new realities of their own design.

I’m not calling on writing teachers to completely abandon the academic discourse we teach. When we teach students to do academic writing, we are teaching them to work within and against institutional constraints, to be critical of the texts and systems that surround them. We teach them to recognize that others have spoken before them and to carve their own positions out of existing work by reading against other readings. The gesture of recognizing what has been said, however, is one of the most elusive for young writers. The difficulty is magnified when we ask them to enter conversations on traditional academic subjects like literature and history. Many students seem to think that these topics have been talked to death already, that there’s nothing new for them to say. As a result, some may
make claims about topics without considering sources or any evidence that might weigh for or against their positions. They simply opine, instead of criticizing or advocating.

My argument depends on the idea that punk discourse moves beyond criticism. Punk interrogates and deconstructs texts/symbols/icons/cultures much like academic discourses do. However, punk also goes beyond that. The punk writer typically provides alternatives to the problems identified in the writing. Often those alternatives advocate subverting dominant ideologies and punk writers cast their solutions in terms that mainstream audiences would blanche at. The Dead Kennedys’ “Stars and Stripes of Corruption” doesn’t stop at lambasting flag-waving pseudo-patriots for their racist, xenophobic, anti-freedom zealousy; it calls for maximizing freedom and the right to speak out against corruption and injustice. I’m not suggesting that we assign students essays filled with four-letter words and anti-government spewings, but rather that we encourage students to risk advocating positions instead of only critiquing other offerings. While other pedagogies also encourage students to take positions, punk pedagogy focuses on the agency of writing—on writing as the vehicle for change that it can be when the writer is really behind it.

At the heart of my call for advocacy is a felt sense that some students are becoming passive. Student-centered classrooms are designed to empower students, but too often students leave such classrooms with little sense of responsibility to their cultures. We encourage them to assume authority as writers, to find a voice, or to “claim an interpretive project of their own,” but we don’t give them any real encouragement to speak. Or more precisely, we may not make it clear to them that they must use writing to address problems with the culture. What they lack is a sense that they need to say anything at all.

I’m not placing blame on writing teachers for the passivity that we constantly face. Much of the blame rests on a growing trend in all corners of society not to take action or responsibility for what happens in the world. I’m looking for a way to attack their inactivity in writing courses. A punk-driven course, with its emphasis on DIY motivation, personal responsibility for actions, and highly intense (sometimes angry, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes happy, sometimes violent) attitude, might go a long way towards encouraging, in fact demanding, that student writers use their writing to take a stand, to fix a problem, to break what they want broken and put it back together again the way they want it put.

The course that enacts this pedagogy teaches students that resistance resulting from inertia is pointless, as is rebellion for its own sake. At the same time, student writers are in a position to point out the problems in every culture or subculture, dorm room or classroom, while they have
somebody who is a more experienced writer to help them. The underlying idea of the course is that students both can and must speak out when they have something to say. Ideally, the seeds of DIY will sprout, and students will take charge of their writing and hence of their lives, discovering that words they put on a page mean something. They can make demands, and if they make them well (which may require making them loudly and repeatedly), they can get action.

When I first started picturing how punk ideology would work in a writing course, I envisioned a course that relied heavily on punk music, using the music as a model and an inroad into the sense of power and agency that writing can provide. However, I understand that not every teacher can (or wants to) work with those kinds of texts in his or her class. With that realization in mind, I want to finish out by describing two versions of a punk-driven writing course. One version I just finished teaching, and it didn’t explicitly refer to or rely on the language of punk subcultures; the other I’ll teach in the Spring of 1998.

As for the course we just completed—ostensibly, our work focused on the concept of authority: defining it, interrogating it, and finally assuming it. Students spent six weeks writing daily on authority in language, institutions, relationships, and so on. While much of their writing was deconstructive in nature, I worked very hard to convince these students that their work was a form of action, that writing critically about authority figures is a way of addressing those figures. My goal was to leave them with a strong sense of their own rhetorical agency. Although I rarely introduced the term “punk” into the classroom, I built the course to emphasize punk’s proactive nature.

The writing for the course broke down into three sequences of exploratory writings and a final essay. First, students wrote three essays investigating and naming sources and types of authority. Essays ranged from wondering why parents have the right to make curfews, to why age or size or knowledge or charisma generate power, to the divine nature of God’s authority. The class then wrote three exploratory essays in which they interrogated authority figures and institutions, deconstructing institutional claims to power. The final sequence asked them to take responsibility: to claim authority over a certain situation, and to explain why their claims were justified and what they planned to do. Once the students completed these sequences, they generated essay topics ranging from analyzing the power of popular culture icons to arguing the need for increased gun control. Our extended conversation about the nature of authority in language, symbols, and institutions provided students ways to talk about the world, and, more importantly, things to say to the world, that I really believe they didn’t have in their arsenals before the course.
My course for next spring, "Writing about Punk Rock," asks students to write and read extensively, looking at their own rebelliousness (the first paper assignment asks for them to describe and think about a situation in which they behaved subversively) and the rebelliousness of others (we will spend much of our class time examining punk music and lyrics, as well as reading about major figures in various punk subgenres). Their readings and their writings for most of the course will focus on finding the point where passionate advocacy ends and lunatic ranting begins. Their final essay will ask them to construct a subversive text, to call for action on an issue or against an institution that concerns them. The format of their original punk texts will be open—they can write songs, articles, letters, whatever. They will be able to work individually or in groups. They will need to decide how best to say what they want said, to do-it-themselves. The course will challenge students to take action.

This course should also challenge me as a teacher to keep from overinstitutionalizing the very individuality I want to foster; there is a tension between my desire to teach active subversion and my institutional bonds. However, I’m not convinced that this tension is substantially different from the ever-present tension between decentering our classrooms and handing out assignments and grades to our students. Tension lies at the heart of the punk classroom. Frankly, I find this tension between myself as a subversive and as an institutional representative intriguing. If I do my job well, the lesson I can teach students is that pro-action can come from anywhere. The position of the actor, and the languages the actor speaks, are secondary to the actor’s intentions and activity. Power doesn’t necessarily derive from titles and natural talent. Just because I’m (probably) a more accomplished writer than my students doesn’t mean that they don’t have anything to say; likewise, just because I draw a paycheck from the university doesn’t mean I don’t have anything to say. What’s more important is to say something. If my teaching results in a class full of students who can successfully subvert me (as long as they think what I’m doing is really bad), I will consider my work successful. The risk seems worth taking if I can develop writers who need to say what’s on their minds.

Ultimately, I believe that studying and writing in a punk classroom can work to improve student writing in several different ways. First, readings and listenings can and should be models of how much commitment can go into and come out of writing. The Dead Kennedys’ “Stars and Stripes of Corruption” and the Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen” are among many incredibly powerful statements of engagement and commitment that my students will hear throughout the course. Second, the course should require the same commitment from them in their own writing. Reading, responding, and leading discussions as a punk teacher requires making
strong demands on students to mean what they say, as well as to say what they mean. Third, it will provide them with a discourse that helps them see both the value and the problems of academic discourses. It seems to me that we can use punk discourse to cast criticism in a language that’s at least less alien (by virtue of its pop culture languages and students’ familiarity with it) than more traditional languages of the academy. By doing so, we provide them access to a process that we value, while not forcing a new vocabulary on them. Fourth, it will give students a vehicle to voice their own resistance. Students leaving the punk writing course may move outwards to other, less aggressive forms of critical discourse, but the lessons in proactivity and DIY ethics should serve them well no matter who they talk at. Viva la revolution!

**Never Mind the Sex Pistols, Where’s 2Pac?**

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Black man got a lot of problems  
But they don’t mind throwin’ a brick.  
White people go to school  
Where they teach you how to be thick

—The Clash, “White Riot”

A punk pedagogy is inevitable; reversibility has become the essential hermeneutic of modernity (the *first light* of modernism, as it dawns on Duchamp, is his print of the word *NON*). I have very little to add to Seth Kahn-Egan’s pedagogical reflections, except slight reserve on two issues. First, although I might like to teach a *cultural studies* course on Punk Rock, I’d never do heavy nostalgia in a composition class. I hate to make anyone share my enthusiasms: I’d get creeped out, feeling like Allan Bloom playing students his Mozart records. To maintain the punk negation, yet finesse the potential boredom involved in dated material, I base my first-year course around gangsta rap—my students’ preference, my pleasure. In fact, the gangsta negation is even arguably stronger, maybe because race and class become leading factors. (If society hated punks, how would we term their feeling for thugs? It’s the difference, maybe, between creep and criminal). Gangsta, like punk, like Malcolm X, is all about using a kind of plainspeak grammar and lexicon, charged with as much poetry as one can muster, to fashion a desperate politics of decency in an indecent world. Style counts, not as belletristic prose or academic discursivity, but as character, attitude (and this is, of course, punk; as Malcolm McLaren puts it in his recent “Elements of Anti-Style,” punk “wasn’t fashion as a commodity...[but] fash-