

2-1988

The Liminal Servant and the Ritual Roots of Critical Pedagogy

Peter McLaren

Chapman University, mclaren@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/education_articles

 Part of the [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McLaren, P. (1988). The liminal servant and the ritual roots of critical pedagogy. *Language Arts*, 65(2): 164-179.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Educational Studies at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

The Liminal Servant and the Ritual Roots of Critical Pedagogy

Comments

This article was originally published in *Language Arts*, volume 65, issue 2, in 1988.

Copyright

National Council of Teachers of English

The Liminal Servant and the Ritual Roots of Critical Pedagogy

Peter L. McLaren

My work in the anthropology of education has, in recent years, consisted of locating theoretical advances in ritual and performance studies and placing them within the practicality of the pedagogical encounter between teacher and student. Bringing contemporary work in ritual studies into rapprochement with fieldwork in urban classrooms is meant to provide the reform-minded educator with a broad construction for unravelling and decoding obstacles faced by working-class students in acquiring an education.

The basis of my work has consisted in demonstrating various examples of school-based ritual and examining their implicit relationships within the wider cultural system. The theoretical backdrop from which this work has evolved lies in the inescapable fact that the culture of the classroom is fundamentally formed by interrelated rituals, ritual systems, and ritual performances. Such a perspective posits classroom culture as a construction that remains a consistent and meaningful reality through the overarching organization of rituals and symbol systems. Symbols may be verbal or nonverbal and are usually tied to the philosophical ethos of the dominant culture.

Classroom culture does not manifest itself as some pristine unity or disembodied homogeneous entity but is, rather, discontinuous, murky, and provocative of competition and conflict; it is a collectivity which is composed of competing class, cultural, and symbolic interests. It is furthermore, a symbolic arena where students and teachers struggle over the interpretations of ritual performances and symbolic meanings, and where symbols have both centripetal and centrifugal pulls.

Drawing upon recent field work experiences in a Catholic junior high school in Toronto, Canada, I have analyzed classroom culture as a ritual system and teaching as a ritual performance (McLaren 1986). The student population of St. Ryan (not the school's real name) consisted primarily of Portuguese and Italian working-class students.

Rituals of Performance

In this paper I would like to discuss teachers as three distinct types of ritual performers which I refer to as teacher-as-liminal-servant¹ teacher-as-entertainer;

¹I am using the term "liminal servant" after Urban T. Holmes' description of the priest. See Urban T. Holmes, *The Priest in Community: Exploring the Roots of Ministry*, New York, Seabury

and teacher-as-hegemonic overlord.² (I would like to stress that these are ideal typical roles.)

When students responded with a sense of immediacy or purpose, either verbally or gesturally, to the teacher's performance—when, for instance, they became the primary actors within the ritual of instruction—then they engaged in an authentic pedagogical rite: the surroundings were sanctified,³ and the students became cocelebrants in the learning process which was characterized by intense involvement and participation. In this case, the teacher achieved the role of liminal servant.

When students were actively engaged by the instructor but, due to various obstacles inherent in the ritual structure, content, and performance (such as poor timing, bad planning, lack of communicative competency, or failure to assume a critical perspective with regard to the subject matter), they remained isolated and unreflective viewers of the action, then the students were in the process of being entertained. The classroom was transformed into a theater and the students constituted an audience. In this instance, the teacher assumed an entertainment role: as a propagandist—or even worse, an evangelist—for dominant cultural, economic, or ethical interests.

When, however, the teacher was unable to arouse any student interest or to provoke any genuine response to the instruction—either verbally, gesturally, or in the form of quiet contemplation on the part of the students—then the students no longer figuratively sat in a cathedral or theater of learning but in Max Weber's iron cage. The teacher became reduced to a hegemonic overlord and knowledge was passed on perfunctorily—as though it were a tray of food pushed under a cell door. In such a situation—one that is all too common in our classrooms—the few feet surrounding the student might as well have been a place of solitary confinement: a numbing state of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual emptiness.

Rappaport (1976) has made an important distinction between ritual and theater. He suggests that:

Rituals may . . . be distinguished from drama by the relationship of those present to what is being performed. While an audience is in attendance at a drama, a con-

Press, 1978. Liminality is a term developed by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and adopted by Victor Turner (1969) that refers to a homogeneous social state in which participants are stripped of their usual status and authority. It is a process of mid-transition—sometimes known as “betwixt and between”—in which participants are removed temporarily from a social structure that is maintained and sanctioned by power and force. Comradeship and communion between participants is frequently liberated in this state.

²Hegemony refers to the dominant system of “lived meanings” which becomes an important factor in mobilizing spontaneous group consent within social institutions; it is a process which creates an ideology pervasive and potent enough to penetrate the level of common sense and suffuse society through taken-for-granted rules of discourse (cf. Apple 1979, pp. 1–25).

³I am using the term “sanctity” here after Rappaport who defines it as “the quality of unquestionableness imputed by a congregation to propositions in their nature neither verifiable nor falsifiable” (1980, p. 189).

gregation is present at a ritual. An audience merely watches but a congregation participates, usually in some degree actively . . . And while those who enact a drama are “only acting” in a play, those who celebrate rituals are “not playing” or “play-acting”, they are taking action, and it is often very serious action. (p. 86)

Making a similar point, Victor Turner (1982) has written:

Ritual, unlike theatre, does not distinguish between audience and performers. Instead, there is a congregation whose leaders may be priests, party officials, or other religious or secular ritual specifists, but all share formally and substantially the same set of beliefs and accept the same system of practices, the same sets of rituals or liturgical actions. (1982, p. 112)

This time drawing on a quote from Schechner, Turner articulates the difference between ritual and theater:

Theatre comes into existence when a separation occurs between an audience and performers. The paradigmatic theatrical situation is a group of performers soliciting an audience who may or may not respond by attending. The audience is free to stay away—and if they stay away it is the theatre that suffers, not its would-be audience. In ritual, stay-away means rejecting the congregation—or being rejected by it, as in excommunication, ostracism, or exile. (p. 112)

According to the contexts provided by Turner and Schechner, most classroom instruction in the school I studied took place in instructional theaters or cages with teachers unwittingly assuming the teacher-as-entertainer or teacher-as-hegemonic-overlord model rather than that of the liminal servant. That is, instruction lacked the participatory ethos and binding solidarity of genuine ritual that often occurs when participants believe in, acknowledge, and “feel” the salutary and transformative dynamics of the ritual. (This is not to deny that there are always ritual celebrants who simply go “through the motions.”)

The pretense that learning is primarily a product of individual student volition—regardless of the character of the teacher’s performance and the nature of the pedagogical event—inured students to the absence of real, active, participatory experience. Regrettably, students were too often reduced to the role of pure spectators who assimilated knowledge *about* things rather than *of* things in relation to other things (knowledge as lived experience). In effect, teachers lacked a theory of experience that would allow them to develop a pedagogy capable of eliciting dynamic forms of participation by positively resonating with the dreams, desires, voices, and utopian longings of their students.

Unfortunately, students will often uncritically accept theatrical antics from teachers as a surrogate for true instructional liminality; students become inured to the teacher as a prison guard or hegemonic overlord rather than experience the liminal dimensions of the pedagogical encounter. As a whole, students appear to be sufficiently critical to accept, but not to criticize, the dominant modes of pedagogical discourse.

It is unfortunate that teacher roles too often manifested what Richard Courtney (1982) calls an “improper use of impersonation.” Courtney tells us that

under certain conditions identification can degenerate into pseudo-roles: the individual who surrenders to a role acts according to the image he would like to maintain. He is guided by role expectations rather than the demands of the situation and his own Being. He “pretends” to be a teacher or a student; he gestures and postures. The student pretends to pay attention. The teacher pretends to teach. Then schooling becomes an elaborate game and dramatization has got out of hand. Neither must submit to their roles. their authentic pedagogic relationship is an encounter where they acknowledge each other. That is genuine drama. (p. 151)

School Knowledge

Classroom instruction that primarily consisted of the recitation of facts by teachers too often amounted to a pseudo-ritual bereft of meaningful symbols and gestural metaphors. Over time, knowledge of this sort remained unembodied and hence removed from the students’ corpus of felt meanings. That is, knowledge remained distant and outside of the *lived experience* of the students.

During most of the lessons I observed, teachers distanced⁴ their performance to such an extent that what they had to say failed to make an organic impression on students. There was little stimulation and tension and therefore little catharsis. In addition, no immediate discussion or portrayal of events occurred which students could recognize as being vitally important. As lived bodies of authorized precedent, the microrituals served mainly as sacred shields behind which teachers could hide from the incessant attempts by students to create their own personalized streetcorner culture inside school walls.

Student: Most of the lessons are boring. Same old thing all the time. Why can’t teachers make things interesting? They never ask us what we think is important.

As part of the instructional process, teachers consciously—even self-consciously—manipulated ritual symbols and gestures in order to both entertain (in the sense of keeping the students interested and occupied) and control the students (keeping student behavior within predictable limits). Teachers usually spent a great deal of time “being in one’s head” while “acting” the role of teacher. Gestures were dissimulative, were acted out for the sake of the spectator, and were often hidden behind the trappings of various “official” facades and personae.

Teacher: Sometimes I can see myself in different roles. Sometimes I’m like a parent. Other times I’m more like a sergeant. But you can’t be too friendly or the kids

⁴I am referring here to the term “distancing” used by Thomas J. Scheff, “The Distancing of Emotion in Ritual,” *Current Anthropology*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1977, pp. 483–504; and *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama*, 1979, Los Angeles, University of California Press.

will take advantage of you and you'll lose some respect and suffer the consequences for the rest of the year.

In contrast, many students regarded the heteronomy of imitating "the good student" with a certain amount of disdain. Some students were able to collude in search of appropriate gestures and decorum to fit the values and attitudes perceived to be those held by the teachers. Hence, there were those students who had mastered the art of "acting middle-class" and reaped the rewards of a good evaluation and a chance to enter or remain in an advanced program.

Student: I hate trying to act like a browner. But you can get away with it. If the teacher thinks you're trying to be a browner before exams, then you'll get better marks. But you might lose your friends if you stay a browner too long.

Ritual Knowledge

A crucial research category often overlooked by educational ethnographers is that of the *body*, how it is inscribed in the geography of desire, and how our affective or visceral investments in the world provide a sense of unity and totality to our multiple subject positioning within discursive formations. Rarely considered in the debates over learning is the notion that knowledge is also *performatively constituted*. It is, in a word, discourse given sentience. I have used the term "ritual knowledge" to refer to that aspect of learning which emphasizes affective investment or bodily knowing as distinct from ideational or semantic competency. Ritual, as I define the term, refers to the gestural embodiment of metaphors and symbols; that is, they are symbols or metaphors somaticized or "bodied forth." Ritual knowledge has a tendency to become self-effacing since it often assumes the second nature of habits. That is, it completes its work by disguising its own activity.

Classroom instruction can, within this framework, be understood as ritually coded gestures. Students react to and sometimes resist pedagogical instruction which is itself a form of ritual knowledge. Ritual knowledge possesses an incarnate character; it is acquired intellectually and inheres in the "erotics of knowing." (Dixon 1974) It is both reflective and prereflective. Students acquire and react to information viscerally, depending on both the symbols and metaphors available during the pedagogical encounter and the morphology of the instruction itself; that is, students make affective investments in certain kinds of knowledge. In so doing, the distinction between themselves and their actions often becomes nominal: the student becomes both the means and the end of the ritualizing act. Thus, to speak of students creating classroom rituals is somewhat misleading. Rather, it is better to say that rituals create their participants "ideologically" by providing and legitimating the gestural metaphors and rhythms through which they engage the world. Ritual knowledge is not some-

thing to be “understood”; it is always, whether understood or not, something which is felt and responded to somatically.

Ritual knowledge is epistemologically disparate from traditional conceptions of school knowledge. It is a type of *mimesis* or visceral/erotic identification. My research at St. Ryan revealed a distinction between streetcorner knowledge and knowledge acquired in classroom settings. Knowledge acquired in the streets was “lived” and mediated through discursive alignments and affective investments not found in the school. It was mediated by a different symbol and ritual system in which what mattered was always “felt,” whereas school knowledge was often sullied by an inflated rationalism. In the streets, students made use of more bodily engagement and organic symbols. In the classroom, knowledge was more symbolically sophisticated, but because such knowledge was discarnate and not a lived engagement, it remained distant, isolated, abstract. It was a knowledge that had become decultured and delibidinalized and safely insulated from the “tainted” production of desire, a knowledge that had been made congruent with the discourse of the other, one which speaks for the students but one to which they have little access without relinquishing the codes that affirm their dignity and streetcorner status. Students chose not to invest affectively in this kind of knowledge.

Instructional rituals became useful adjuncts in the positioning of students as subjects within various discursive alignments and in the ingraining—both bodily and cognitively—of certain acceptable dispositions and dimensions which were linked to the cultural capital of the dominant culture. Students actively resisted the eros-denying quality of school life, in which students were turned into discarnate beings, unfettered by the desires that play on the nerve endings of living flesh. Accordingly, their bodies became sites of struggle, in which resistance became a way of gaining power, celebrating pleasure, and fighting oppression in the lived historicity of the moment and the concrete materiality of the classroom.

Intellectual labor had little affective currency because it was removed from any celebration of the body as a locus of meaning. This points to the idea that ideological hegemony is not realized solely through the discursive mediations of the sociocultural order but through the enfleshment of unequal relationships of power. Hegemony is manifest intercorporeally through the actualization of the flesh and embedded in incarnate experience. Students whose subjectivities were “decentered” in school could reclaim their sense of subjective continuity through affective investment in street life. Students battled daily to reconcile the disjunction between the lived meaning of the streets and the thing-oriented, digital approach to learning in the classroom. The structuration of students’ subjectivities begins with their subordination to a field of cultural desire born of the symbols and narratives of the street and the classroom and also with the organization of their bodies. That is, subjectivity is produced both discursively

and nondiscursively, beginning with the regimes of truth governing language, desire, and movement. The positionalities of ideology become the intersections at which symbols and ritual metaphors are inscribed in the body.

It would appear theoretically shortsighted to limit our understanding of student learning to the comprehension of signs and symbols. Rather, we must pay more attention to the affective power invested in these signs and symbols and the body's sensuous relationship to them. Accordingly, the bodies of the students become sites of struggle in which resistance is a way of gaining power, celebrating pleasure, and fighting oppression in the lived historicity of the moment and the concrete materiality of the classroom.

The Liminal Servant

The following section on the liminal servant is a composite description of what I consider to be the best attributes of a teacher working within a critical pedagogy. These attributes have been collected from observing teachers both formally and informally for over a decade. Some of the characteristics of the liminal servant were evident in the teacher performances I observed at St. Ryan.

I want to suggest that the teacher as liminal servant has a twofold purpose, that of developing as part of the pedagogical encounter both a discourse of critique and possibility (Aronowitz and Giroux 1985). Teaching within a mode of critique, the liminal servant sees beyond the false harmony that exists between the subject and the social order and recognizes that knowledge is always constructed in a social and historical context in which there is always a struggle over the production of meaning, a struggle which reflects a still larger conflict over relations of power. That is, it is understood that pedagogical practices stand in relation to a dominant ideology that defines what is accepted as legitimate knowledge, that constructs social relations around specific interests, and which upholds specific structures of inequality and asymmetrical relations of power and privilege.

Teaching is acknowledged as taking place in relation to a particular regime of truth or dominating logic. As such, the liminal servant realizes that school knowledge does not provide students with a reflection of the world but creates a specific rendering of the world which is only intelligible within particular ideological configurations, social formations, or systems of mediation.

For the liminal servant, teaching itself is a social construction as well as a function to create or produce students as subjects. How students, as subjects, are positioned by various pedagogical discourses and practices constitutes an ideological process that constructs an illusion of autonomy and self-determination and often causes students to misrecognize themselves as unproduced free agents and to misrecognize their own knowledge as the will-to-power masquerading as truth. While it may be true that none of us can ever escape ide-

ology, it is the necessary task of the liminal servant both to reveal how subjectivity gets constructed and legitimated through dominant pedagogical discourses and to eventually challenge the imaginary relations that students live relative to the symbolic and material conditions of their existence. The liminal servant understands learning as more than a one-way road from ignorance to knowledge. Ignorance is not a lack of knowledge but a part of the very structure of knowledge. Furthermore, it is not a passive state but an active refusal to know, a willing exclusion of knowledge from consciousness. As a form of passionate resistance to knowing, ignorance can be transformed into liberating knowledge only when the teacher becomes a student of the pupil's needs and desires, and when the teacher is willing to be taught by the pupil's unconscious (Penley 1986).

The liminal servant's task takes the form of a critical pedagogy. That is, the liminal servant does more than simply further legitimate shared assumptions, agreed-upon proprieties, or established conventions. He or she must excavate the "subjugated knowledges" of those who have been marginalized, vanquished, and disaffected, whose histories of suffering and hope have rarely been made public. Thus, they frequently point to the histories of women, people of color, working-class groups, and others whose histories challenge the moral legitimacy of the state. These stories and struggles of the oppressed are often lodged as "dangerous memories" in the state's repressed unconscious. As a teacher of "dangerous memory" the liminal servant releases symbols and narratives of the "Other" to rub against the normative frames of reference which give dominant knowledge its meaning and legitimacy.

The liminal servant performs a social function that is never innocent. There is no sphere beyond good and evil in which the liminal servant can retreat to engage and produce his or her commentary knowledge and instruction. As one who takes seriously what it means to link language, knowledge, and power, the liminal servant first dignifies his or her own position by recognizing that the foundation for all human agency as well as teaching is steeped in a commitment to engage and critically reconstruct the possibilities for human life and freedom.

The liminal servant functions as more than an agent of social critique by attempting to fashion a language of possibility and hope that points to new forms of social and material relations attentive to the principles of freedom and justice (Aronowitz and Giroux 1985). In this manner, critical discourse becomes more than a form of cultural dissonance, more than a siphoning away of the potency of dominant meaning and social relations but rather the creation of a democratic public sphere built upon a language of public association and a commitment to social transformation. It becomes, furthermore, a call for a new narrative through which a qualitatively better world can both be imagined and struggled for. Within this perspective, teaching takes on an anticipatory char-

acter rooted in a dialectical logic that makes critique and transformation its central moments (cf. Giroux 1983).

When a teacher possesses the attributes of a liminal servant, an added vitality is brought to the rites of instruction: figurative significance is given to the learning process, and the context of the lessons is transformed from the indicative (a stress on mere facts) to the subjunctive (a stress on the “as if” quality of learning), from resistance to undifferentiated human kindness, and from within the confines of social structures to the seedbeds of creativity located within the antistructure (a receptive mode of consciousness in which we exist in a state of human totality).

The liminal servant is both a convener of customs and a cultural provocateur—yet transcends both roles. The political rights of students are never subordinated to their utility as future members of the labor force. The liminal servant is as much a social activist and spiritual director as a school pedagogue. Successful ministering to students involves personal charisma, powers of observation and diagnosis, and the ability to provide students with an historical and communal presence. Liminal servants view working-class students, minority groups, and women as members of subordinate cultures. Not only do they fight for the equality of students outside of the classroom, but they also attempt to educate fellow teachers around the ways in which they may unwittingly silence students and disempower them on the basis of race, class, or gender.

The liminal servant presents an array of symbols which have a high density of meaning for the student; a “felt context” is established for the subject matter that is to be engaged by promoting conditions which will allow students to internalize both exegetical (normative) and orectic (physical) meanings. By thus creating a particular posture towards symbols that resonate with students’ streetcorner knowledge, the liminal servant is able to ensure that symbols possess a catalytic and transformative power.

The liminal servant is the bringer of culture and is ever cognizant of his or her shamanic roots. A mystagogue rather than ideologue, the liminal servant does not eschew theory (which would be a form of pedagogic pietism), nor is intuition avoided that comes with practice (where avoidance would amount to a moribund intellectualism or ‘siege mentality’). The *métier* of the liminal servant is the clearing away of obstacles to the embodiment of knowledge. Making excuses for student deficiencies is abjured in favor of a celebration of their academic strengths and abilities.

The liminal servant is wary of too much ratiocination and leans towards divining myths, metaphors, and rhythms that will have meaning and purpose for students—not just as abstractions, but as ‘lived forms’ of consciousness. Modes of symbolic action are employed that do not betray a cleavage between conception of an idea and its execution or the passive reception of facts and the active participatory ethos of ‘learning by doing’. The liminal servant encourages stu-

dents to enact metaphors and embody rhythms that bypass the traditional mind/body dualism so prevalent in mainstream educational epistemology and practice. The liminal servant engages in a form of pedagogical surrealism as a prime court of appeal against rational education practices. In this way, the liminal servant is able to redistribute, recombine and juxtapose the artificial codes that make up classroom reality so as to relativize education's "natural" hierarchies and relationships. Unlike the humanist who begins with the different and renders it comprehensible, the liminal servant as surrealist attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness, and perturbing commonplace perspectives (cf. Clifford 1980).

The liminal servant does not put a high priority on structure and order (although classes may be highly structured and ordered), and conditions are "conjured" which are amenable to the eventuation of *communitas*⁵ and flow.⁶ The liminal servant knows that he or she must not merely hand over received wisdom from the warehouse of cultural knowledge and the great traditions but must allow students to "embody" or incarnate knowledge through an active interrogation of its ideological precepts and assumptions.

As in the case of the teacher-as-entertainer, the ontological status and personal characteristics of the liminal servant are intrinsically ambiguous. However, there are essential differences between these two pedagogical types. Whereas the teacher-as-entertainer tries to suppress individuality, the liminal servant tries to foster individual *endowment*. The teacher-as-entertainer is intent upon conditioning for sameness; the liminal servant nurtures counterhegemonic forces through the cultivation among the students of an alter-ideology. It is through this alter-ideology that the liminal servant is able to educate for individuality, distinction, and singular purpose. But such a pedagogical practice is not meant to foster social fragmentation, privatization, and atomization, but rather to empower the oppressed, the disenfranchised, and the disinherited to develop a collective understanding and struggle to change their own oppressive realities. In the final analysis, the liminal servant is closer to his students than to the teaching profession itself.

⁵"Communitas" refers to the temporary camaraderie which occurs when roles or statuses are suspended between fellow liminals. A deep foundational and fundamental bond is established. Victor Turner has defined three types of *communitas*: (1) spontaneous or existential *communitas*, (2) normative *communitas*, and (3) ideological *communitas*. Spontaneous *communitas* is the opposite of social structure; it defies the deliberate cognitive and volitional construction. Normative *communitas* tries to capture and preserve spontaneous *communitas* in a system of ethical precepts and legal rules. Ideological *communitas* refers to the formulation of remembered attributes of the *communitas* experience in the form of a utopian blueprint for the reform of society.

⁶"Flow" is a term developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) which refers to the holistic sensation present when individuals act with total involvement. Turner has linked the inner logic of flow to liminality (1982).

The teacher-as-entertainer often fails to see the value of unique human experience whereas the liminal servant is never blind to the significance of both individual and collective struggle to name and construct meaning. The teacher-as-hegemonic overlord is not concerned either with the question of student experience, empowerment, or the construction and transformation of experience; lessons are followed strictly and mordantly by the book. On a more abstract level, this teacher-type represents a conditioned reflex of the culture's consensus ideology.

All teachers represented by this typology are "cultural practitioners" who produce, orchestrate, integrate, and distribute cultural meanings, offer their incantations of various educational mythologies, and help to suffuse the classroom with particular orders of experience. To a far greater extent than the other pedagogical types, the liminal servant is able to help students crack the prevailing cultural crust and discover alternative meanings. In this manner, the liminal servant is a vagrant, a "tramp of the obvious" who becomes the "tramp of demystifying conscientization" (Freire 1984, p. 171). The ordinary thus becomes the object of critical examination and reflection.

The liminal servant understands teaching to be essentially an improvised drama that takes place within a curricular narrative. To fully understand the subtext of the student, the liminal servant must "become" the student as part of the dramatic encounter. While in the thrall of such a drama, the liminal servant knows that the results will often be unpredictable; that understanding, like play, has a spirit of its own (cf. Courtney 1982). Feelings and attitudes become the matrix of learning for the liminal servant; thus, the rational processes of his students must be placed in an emotive context.

The liminal servant often challenges the presuppositions embedded in deductive logic. Moreover, the distinction between abstract and objective truth is recognized. Aesthetic truth is prized as much as objective truth, for truth can only become "real" when a student acts with it (cf. Courtney 1982).

The liminal servant is a parashaman (cf. Grimes 1982); he or she is performance oriented and enjoys working in small groups as distinct from an entire class. The liminal servant teaches in order to discover his or her own meanings and not merely to share available answers. Teaching is a form of "holy play" that is more akin to the drama of hunting societies than to the theater of agricultural societies (cf. Grimes 1982).

The liminal servant is a transformative intellectual (cf. Aronowitz and Giroux 1985) who understands the critical role that educators play at all levels of schooling in producing and legitimating existing social relations and practices. As a transformative intellectual, the liminal servant critically engages the dominating logic of school life through an active involvement in oppositional discourses in which the primacy of the political is continually asserted anew.

The type of pedagogy undertaken by the liminal servant is one in which students are continually asked to examine the various codes—that is, the beliefs,

the values, and the assumptions—that they utilize in order to make sense of their world. They are also encouraged to examine how they “codify” events in the classroom in addition to life outside the school. One concrete example of this would be to ask students to write a number of short papers in which they are asked to consider not only various ways of making sense of an issue or event, but to reflect upon their own previous writings in order to rethink past perspectives and to modify or reshape positions that they presently assume. The guiding imperative for this kind of activity is to encourage students to sort through the contradictions of their own experiences while raising the question put forward by Henry Giroux: “What is it this society has made of me that I no longer want to be?” (Giroux 1986). In short, students are asked to look at their taken-for-granted experiences (the ideologies of everyday life), including the acts of writing and dialogue themselves, as possible sources of learning.

In his masterful work, *The Grain of the Voice*, Roland Barthes (1985) warns against teachers assuming the voice of power which can potentially smother student talk by the assignment of the teacher’s meanings—the “authoritative text”—to the texts they have read or the ideas in which they are presently engaging. Barthes extends the function of the liminal servant by suggesting that teachers should employ the strategy of *disappropriation*, that is, the task of deliberately casting off authority as speaker so that students can claim some authority of their own (Harris 1987). In this way, the role of the teacher becomes detached from that of representative of the dominant culture who functions to tell students whether their interpretations of events are valid—in short, to tell them *who they are*. Instead, the teacher as liminal servant serves a counter-hegemonic role, actively contesting existing relations of power and privilege. The purpose of this activity is to show students the forces behind their own interpretations, to call into question the ideological nature of experience, and to reveal the interconnections between the community, culture, and the larger social context: in short, to explore the dialectic of self and society.

The liminal servant possesses an intuitive index by which to adjudicate the symbolic and performative characteristics of instruction—apart, that is, from their efficacy and aesthetics. What is important for the liminal servant is to be able to evaluate whether or not the ritualized exigencies of instruction mediate in favor of or against the academic prosperity of students and whether or not their lessons enhance student self-empowerment through the development of a critical class consciousness.

Since, properly speaking, instructional rituals can only be evaluated relationally, that is, in the context of performance, the liminal servant eschews a rigid or hidebound set of principles in assessing what characteristics a good ritual of instruction must possess. The evaluative criteria by which a given ritual performance may be faulted or accredited consists of a number of general questions which reflect the extent to which these performances become culturally hegemonic.

The hegemony of instructional rites refers not only to how they reinforce or reproduce the political and economic dominance of one social class over another, but also the success with which the dominant class is able to project—through symbolic meanings and practices that structure daily experience—its own way of interpreting the world to the extent that it is considered natural, universal, and all-inclusive.

Thus, rituals are considered “uncritical” by the liminal servant if they constrain the subjectivities of students by placing undue limitations on oppositional discourse, reflective dialogue, and critique. And rituals may be considered “reflective” if they create an alternative to hegemony (counter-hegemony) which will enable participants to critically reflect upon the way reality is perceived and understood. Considerations such as these enfranchise an array of questions which may be asked of the instructional rites of classrooms in general: Whose interests (from the perspectives of social class, culture, gender, and power) do the rituals ultimately serve? Are they keeping certain groups of students in basic level courses or are they providing for the equalization of life chances? Who benefits most from the ritual structures remaining as they are? Who is marginalized as a result? What virtues or vices are embedded in the media and morphology of the rites themselves? How are power and control invested in and mediated through the ritual symbols, ritual paradigms, and ritual codes? How is consciousness “locked” into the messages of the classroom rites? How do the instructional rites inform the values and behavior of the students? In what ways do school rituals uncritically transmit the dominant ideology? The key word here is “uncritically.” Instructional rites are generally criticized by the liminal servant when they provide at the level of common sense little room for ideology-critique, or some form of counterhegemonic and critical dialogue. Likewise, they are criticized if they fail to permit the students to affirm their own experiences, and to evaluate them on a scale of merit which has emerged out of collective reflection and informed self-scrutiny.

Conclusions

Clearly, an important direction in which educational rituals should proceed is in the creation of classroom conditions destined to spawn liminal dimensions of learning in the form of either spontaneous or institutionalized *communitas*. Myerhoff and Metzger (1980) announce that since liminality is not only “reflective” but “reflectiveness,” it is fundamental to the teaching act. In fact, they describe it as “the great moment of teachability . . .” (p. 106).

What is important is the creation of an “intuitive engagement” between teaching and the embodiment of what is taught. We must avoid becoming like Plotinus and feeling ashamed of being in the body. There must not be such a wide disjunction between the generative mode of ritual knowledge which entails exploration and discovery and the pedagogic mode of ritual knowledge (cf. Jennings 1982).

Urban T. Holmes (1978), to whom I owe the term “liminal servant,” reminds us that liminality and *communitas* describe an existence outside the hierarchical constraints of society. For this reason, liminars are open to a reality that is not controlled by societal constraints. As Holmes (1977) puts it: “The imagination is freed!” (p. 95). Furthermore, Holmes writes that *communitas* is a “generative centre” which is the goal of pilgrimage; it is the antistructure⁷ in which we can discover our humanity (p. 83). Needed then, is an instructional approach that is able to find the correct balance ‘between *communitas*, the trip into the world of symbols, and the social structures, life amid the univocal signs’ (p. 95). The individual who can best determine and orchestrate the correct balance between *communitas* and structure is the teacher acting in the role of liminal servant. Knowledge gained in class through a liminal engagement could replace the self-enclosed, uncritical, linear, positivistic, and pathogenic literalism of mainstream schooling with transformative knowledge.

Rituals, as Turner has shown, operate as a dialectical relationship between flow and reflexivity. Too much flow can lead to a sterile anti-intellectualism whereas too much reflexivity can lead to the overdistancing of emotions followed by an intellectual aloofness. On the question of reflexivity, the point must be made that it is not reflexivity itself that contains the seeds of a counterhegemonic discourse, but the ethical imperatives that guide such reflexivity. Reflexivity can do its “work” to create a liberatory pedagogy only when we begin to “unthink” the past (Heidegger 1972) and when we begin to grasp a “reciprocity of perspectives” (Merleau-Ponty 1975, p. 314). This also means that tough questions must be sanctioned by the ritual officiants—such as those dealing with relations of power and privilege and social class.

Compassion and commitment to teach as a social and moral agent in the service of self and social transformation is what guides the pedagogy of the liminal servant. In today’s era of conservative restoration and right-wing retrenchment it is no small matter to encourage teachers to embody the pedagogy of the liminal servant. The anger and sullen outrage that fills the gap between desire and fulfillment for many working-class and minority youths must now be met in the classroom with a redemptive dialectics of hope. It is in such an engagement that we, as liminal servants, can be united with our—and their—estrangement from the world and with the will and the purpose to overcome it.

References

- Apple, Michael. *Ideology and Curriculum*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Aronowitz, Stanley, and Giroux, Henry. *Education Under Siege*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1985.

⁷“Antistructure” is another term to describe the liminal state in which individuals exist outside the structure of roles, statuses, and positions within the society. Rather, the individuals within the antistructure exist in a state of undifferentiated and homogeneous community.

- Barthes, Roland. *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*. Trans. Linda Cloverdale. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.
- Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Surrealism." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23 (1981): 539–564.
- Courtney, Richard. *Re-Play: Studies in Human Drama and Education*. Toronto, OISE Press: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1982.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975.
- Dixon, John W., Jr. "The Erotics of Knowing." *Anglican Theological Review*, 48 (1974): 407–431.
- Freire, Paulo. *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1985.
- Giroux, Henry. *Theory and Resistance in Education*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1983.
- Giroux, Henry. Speech given at the conference "American Dreams" in Indiana, Pennsylvania, October 23–25, 1986.
- Giroux, Henry, and McLaren, Peter. "Teacher Education and the Politics of Engagement: The Case for Democratic Schooling." *Harvard Educational Review*, 56 (1986): 213–238.
- Grimes, Ronald L. *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982.
- Harris, Joseph. "The Plural Text/The Plural Self: Roland Barthes and William Coles." *College English*, 49 (1987): 158–170.
- Heidegger, M. *What is Called Thinking?* (J. Glenn Gray, Trans.). New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972.
- Holmes, Urban T. "Revivals are un-American: A Recalling of America to its Pilgrimage." *Anglican Theological Review*, supplementary series, no. 1 (1978): 58–75.
- Holmes, Urban T. *Ministry and Imagination*. New York: Seabury Press, 1976.
- Holmes, Urban T. "What has Manchester to do with Jerusalem?" *Anglican Theological Review*, 59 (1977): 79–97.
- Holmes, Urban T. *The Priest in Community: Exploring the Roots of Ministry*. New York: Seabury Press, 1978.
- McLaren, Peter. *Cries from the Corridor: The New Suburban Ghetto*. Toronto: Methuen, 1979.
- McLaren, Peter. "Rituals of Resistance in the Culture of Working-class Schoolgirls." *Canadian Women Studies*, 4 (1982).
- McLaren, Peter. "Victor Turner: In Memoriam." *International Semiotic Spectrum*, 1 (1984a).
- McLaren, Peter. "Rethinking Ritual." *Etc: A Review of General Semantics*, 41 (1984b): 267–277.
- McLaren, Peter. "The Ritual Dimensions of Resistance: Clowning and Symbolic Inversion." *Journal of Education*, 167 (1985): 84–97.
- McLaren, Peter. "Postmodernity and the Death of Politics: A Brazilian Reprieve." *Educational Theory*, 36 (1986): 389–401.
- McLaren, Peter. *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Towards a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.
- McLaren, Peter. "The Manipulation of the Symbol." *Anthropologica*, in press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. In *The Primacy of Perception*, edited by J. M. Edie. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1975.

- Myerhoff, Barbara, and Metzger, Deena. "The Journal as Activity and Genre: On Listening to the Silent Laughter of Mozart." *Semiotica*, 30 (1980): 97–114.
- Penley, Constance. "Teaching in Your Sleep: Feminism and Psychoanalysis." In Cary Nelson (Ed.), *Theory in the Classroom*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Rappaport, Roy. "Liturgies and Lies." *International Yearbook for the Sociology of Knowledge and Religion*, 10 (1976): 75–104.
- Rappaport, Roy. "Concluding Remarks on Ritual and Reflexivity." *Semiotica*, 30 (1980): 181–193.
- Schechner, Richard. *The End of Humanism: Writings on Performance*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982.
- Scheff, Thomas J. "The Distancing of Emotion in Ritual." *Current Anthropology*, 18 (1977): 484–504.
- Scheff, Thomas J. *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual and Drama*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine, 1969.
- Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. 1982.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage* (M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.
- Wallace, Anthony. *Religion: An Anthropological View*. New York: Random House, 1966.

Peter L. McLaren teaches in the Educational Leadership department, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.



Photo by Joan M. Dungey

Then said a teacher, Speak to us of Teaching.

And he said:

No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.

The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding.

The musician may sing to you of the rhythm which is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm nor the voice that echoes it.

And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the regions of weight and measure, but he cannot conduct you thither.

For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man.

And even as each one of you stands alone in God's knowledge, so must each one of you be alone in his knowledge of God and in his understanding of the earth.

Kahil Gibran
The Prophet

And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, Speak to us of Children.

And he said:

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Kahil Gibran
The Prophet
