Chalk Dust & the Hands of Time

by Chad Hanson

It was Friday, right before Memorial Day weekend. The Social Science Division was quiet. I was standing in my office when I realized I had finished my 10th year of teaching a week before. I pondered the milestone for a minute, and then I commenced an old routine. I began filing notes, I started stacking long-since-graded tests, and I got ready to recycle a pile of unrequited papers. In the middle of this, I caught myself wondering how the years had slipped away so fast. An entire decade! I guess I wasn't paying attention. Or perhaps I was paying such close attention to my career, pages were flying off the calendar and I didn't notice. In any case, I decided to use the end of the decade as a kind of memorial. As a monument to the 10-year mark, I vowed to spend the summer re-reading some of the books on college teaching that inspired me over the years.

Like most faculty, I have floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in my office. There are shelves for textbooks that I use in class, shelves for theory, shelves for research, and shelves for the substantive areas I consider my specialties. I suspect there are shelves all over the nation organized similarly; faculty offices make loving homes for books. But my favorite shelf sits at the top of my tallest cabinet. It’s the ledge I’ve reserved for books about the craft of teaching.

Before I went home for the summer, I climbed up on a milk crate to peruse

Chad Hanson teaches sociology at Casper College in Casper, Wyoming. His essays, articles, and reviews have appeared in The Teaching Professor, College Teaching, Teaching Sociology, The Education Review, and The Journal of Higher Education, among others. His research interests center on exploring the social, cultural, and political roles of colleges and universities.
the tight row of books on my top shelf. I couldn’t read them all. I figured there was only room for four books in my pack, but the choices weren’t hard to make. I grabbed two books by Ira Shor, Critical Teaching and Everyday Life and Empowering Education. I chose Teaching to Transgress by bell hooks, and I picked The Courage to Teach by Parker Palmer. Four books, one summer—the best way I could think of to commemorate what has been, thus far, a deeply rewarding career.

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By mid June, I found myself staring at the winners of my summer reading lottery. They were waiting patiently in a pile on the floor of my living room. I bent down to grab the books, and I was captured by a thought—*no sociology.* Although my training is interdisciplinary, sociology is the field I call home. Yet in my summer reading project designed to commemorate 10 years as a sociology teacher—no sociology? It wasn’t a conscious choice. It just worked out that way, but I was left wondering why no sociology. I think I know the answer, although it pains me to say it. Sociologists are lousy writers. We use long words and we string complex sentences together like freight cars. We do it because our reward structure is such that we constantly have to prove ourselves to our peers. And unfortunately, the writing of incomprehensible prose is the proof of competence that we honor in the academy. Inaccessible writing forms the foundation upon which many scholars earn their tenure, but it also keeps sociologists from winning an audience outside the field.

To our credit, we’ve been sensitive about this for a long time. For instance, in a 1951 letter to his editor Phillip Vaudrin, C. Wright Mills addressed the question of what it might take to coax readable prose out of sociologists. But he wasn’t optimistic:

> About your question of how to get decent writing from sociologists. It doesn’t look good. I think for two reasons: First, there is no real writing tradition in sociology . . . it just doesn’t exist. Second, the field is now split into statistical stuff and heavy duty theoretical bullshit. In both cases, there’s no writing but turgid, polysyllabic slabs of stuff. ¹
The four books about teaching I chose were written by people in English departments—Ira Shor and bell hooks (nee Gloria Watkins). The exception was Parker Palmer. Palmer is an independent scholar who describes himself as a “recovering sociologist.”1

I selected books by Shor, hooks, and Palmer because they write in the first person and go out of their way to describe their inner lives. I picked their books because they’re autobiographical, and despite the obvious value of large data sets, surveys, and the scientific method, I realized some time ago that it’s important for people to tell their own stories. The autobiography of college teaching is a public record of the joys and perils that are integral to the profession. Autobiographies don’t claim to be objective or unbiased. They simply assert themselves as stories, and as a result they are meaningful, in a much deeper sense than editors usually allow when a publication is packaged for an academic audience. On the level of meaning inherent to stories, Terry Tempest Williams writes:

Story bypasses rhetoric and pierces the heart. Story offers a wash of images and emotion that returns us to our highest and deepest selves, where we remember what it means to be human.3

Teachers are human. I tend to think that they’re even more human than others, and although teachers’ stories don’t generally purport to be methodological in a sense that would satisfy scientific standards, autobiographies are touchstones in the human drama. They are a record of the hope, fear, success, and failure teachers find as they navigate the institution of higher education.

Due in part to the social nature of life writing, sociologists have even begun to turn their attention toward autobiographies and memoirs. After years of dismissing earnest, first person reports as studies where the sample size is one (n=1), sociologists have finally warmed up to the notion that life writing is valuable. In her 1998 volume, Interpreting the Self, Diane Bjorklund suggests, “The writing of an autobiography is a social act—both as part of a ‘community of discourse’ and as a type of social interaction in which one tries to influence others.”4

I chose books by Shor, hooks, and Palmer because I consider myself a mem-
ber of their community of discourse, albeit in a far-removed sense, and I chose their books because they’ve had a profound influence on the way I practice teaching. For all they lack in relation to positivist research, autobiographies hold the potential to move people. They have the power to change us. In autobiographical books and articles, we are privy to the unspoken words that shape teachers’ choices about what to say or how to act in class. That inner dialogue is central to life writing. In autobiographical prose, authors create a literary version of themselves, and in the process they lay their thoughts bare on the page. Consider the following excerpt from an account of a class I taught early in my career:

I said, “Who would like to begin?” No one began. There were no hands in the air. I did not hear the cacophony of voices I had come to know so well in graduate school . . . instead there was silence. This wasn’t graduate school. Twenty-nine pairs of eyes were pointed in my direction. So I began. I continued, and eventually I finished the discussion myself.  

It’s a familiar scenario, but it’s also an important reminder that our conduct is girded by our sense of identity. We enter classrooms with the intent to pass our disciplines down to the next generation, but we also have to manage the ever-present “I” in the room.

We are the main characters in our own productions, and whether we’re conscious of them or not, we live with a set of cultural scripts that guide our thoughts and actions. In the scene described above, I tried to change the storyline. I tried to make room to include student voices in the discussion, but my attempt to hand the dialogue over to students was a flop, so I quickly moved back to an old script, one that was more comfortable for everyone, “teacher as talking head.”

In his 1996 volume *Who Owns the West*, a book about the character of those that inhabit the Rocky Mountain region, William Kittredge offers the following as a testimony to the strength of the relationship between our autobiographies and the scripts that form our identities:

*We live in stories. What we are is stories. We do things because of what is called character, and our character is formed by the stories we learn to live in. Late*
in the night we listen to our own breathing in the dark, and we rework our stories. We do it again the next morning, and all day long before the looking glass of ourselves, reinventing reasons for our lives.5

Character is central to an educator’s craft. Our practice is shaped by our sense of who we are and where we fit in the scheme of things. In other words, the roles we play form the basis for our teaching strategies.

Of course, teachers have the power to decide which roles they fulfill, but roles are primarily social and historic. When teachers step into classrooms, they bring

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with them a lifetime of immersion in the norms, roles, and values of educational institutions. One could argue that we create our own identities as teachers, and that is true. We choose our roles carefully, but we choose roles and creatively conduct ourselves within a finite set of possibilities. Our options are bound by familiarity—the characters we know and the roles we’ve seen enacted in the past.

The autobiography of college teaching is valuable because each autobiography gives readers an opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice and their own identity. Every example of honest life-writing presents readers with a chance to see their personal experience in a fresh light. Kittredge writes, “Useful stories . . . are radical in that they help us see freshly. They are like mirrors, in which we see ourselves reflected.” Although I wouldn’t dare to suggest that I see myself reflected in the work of bell hooks, Ira Shor, or Parker Palmer, I can attest to the fact that they are the authors of extremely useful stories.

I discovered the work of bell hooks when I was a young teacher, still in graduate school. At the time, I was convinced that teaching and scholarship were “serious” pursuits. The truth is, I still do consider teaching and scholarship to be the most serious kind of endeavors, but hooks reminded me that there is room for passion and excitement, even in the most solemn enterprise. She suggests that passion is the wellspring of all the work we take seriously, and I agree. It’s just that the behaviors we associate with college teaching don’t usually lend themselves to frank displays of passion or outright expressions of excitement. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks writes:
The first paradigm that shaped my pedagogy was the idea that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring . . . but there seemed to be no interest . . . in the discussion of the role of excitement in higher education. Excitement in higher education was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process.  

As you might guess, a good deal of hooks's energy is spent overcoming the social conventions of the academy. She uses a simple technique to cut through the fog of boredom that often seeps into college classes. She makes a point to acknowledge her physical presence in the room. She suggests that the values of the academy are such that the body is often seen as a mere addendum to the mind, and she is right. Intellectual pursuits are the priority in education, but hooks claims that we exalt the cognitive to the point where it overshadows the physical, and in the process, we quell the passion that should well up from within the body. On this point, she offers an anecdote:

When I first became a teacher and needed to use the restroom in the middle of class, I had no clue as to what my elders did in such situations. No one talked about the body in relation to teaching. What did one do with the body in the classroom? Trying to remember the bodies of my professors, I find myself unable to recall them. I hear voices, I remember fragmented details, but very few whole bodies. Entering the classroom determined to erase the body and give ourselves over more fully to the mind, we show by our beings how deeply we have accepted the assumption that passion has no place in the classroom.  

When I read this passage for the first time I thought back to my first course in sociology. At the somewhat-less-than-ripe age of 19, I enrolled in an Introduction to Sociology course at Northern Arizona University. I sat in my desk on the first day of class without a clue as to what came next. I was an art major. The course fulfilled a university requirement, and I was glad for that, but I didn’t know what to expect. Then the professor proled into the room. I don’t use the word “prowl” lightly here, and I do not use it in jest. The professor proled. It’s the only way to describe the way he moved around the auditorium—back and forth in
front of the audience, up and down the aisles.

The chalkboard was his medium. He wrote all the headings for our discussion on the board, but in the process of talking us through the lecture he made sweeping gestures toward the words he penned just moments before, and by the end of the hour he was covered in a layer of gold chalk dust.

I have an indelible recollection of Dr. Dale Derrick stalking around the classroom covered in chalk, and the memory confirms that hooks is right. The body is the wellspring of passion. To ignore one's physical presence is to deny the body's life-affirming quality. After three weeks in Derrick's class, I changed my major from art to sociology. Social science was exciting.

Early in my career as a faculty member, I began to wrestle with one of the core questions involved in the teaching of sociology. That is: "How can you create an environment where students learn to see the social forces that impact on their lives?" There is no easy answer, of course. Sociologists have been chipping away at an explanation for more than three decades. Entire journals are devoted to the subject, and I've found them helpful to a degree, but in my search for an answer I also discovered that sociologists aren't the only ones struggling with the question of how to incite the spirit of critical inquiry. There are teachers asking the same question all over the academy. In fact, the issue lies at the heart of what it means to offer a liberal arts education.

As a beginning writing instructor, Ira Shor was confronting the same issue I faced as a sociology teacher. He writes:
My students learned that they should face their future and the dominant power in society alone, counting only on their personal power to make their way forward. . . . This sink-or-swim individualism helps disempower them. . . . It is an oppressive ideology that helps transfer blame for failure from the system to the individual.11

Shor’s teaching practice is largely an attempt to turn the classroom into a site where students develop what he calls “critical literacy.” He works to ensure that students learn how to assess the social patterns they confront. His goal is to

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create an environment where students build the capacity to see the tapestry of culture that colors their lives—for better and for worse. Shor’s method of developing critical literacy is built upon the work of the Brazilian author, Paulo Freire.12 Freire popularized the notion of “problem-posing” in education, a teaching method where the role of the educator is that of a discussion leader. The teacher poses problems for students to consider, and ideally one question leads to another in an ongoing process of discovery. At least, that’s how it’s supposed to work. When it’s done properly, students take control of the discussion. The problem is that it’s hard to rely on student participation and much easier to simply deliver a lecture. In what follows, Shor describes his own struggle to use problem-posing as a means to break from traditional methods:

Much anxiety for me and my students accompanied these kinds of classes. They were unfamiliar learning moments for all of us. I came to class prepared to pose a number of problems for discussion and with a number of ways to develop literacy. At any given moment, I had to be prepared to abandon my plans and move in the direction of the dialogic process.13

Problem-posing is a fluid and unpredictable way to teach, but over the years I became convinced that some aspect of problem-posing is essential for genuine student development. If students are to build a sense of critical literacy, then the classroom has to be a place where they are willing to engage.

My first several experiments with problem-posing were disasters. I had
accepted the notion that education is more meaningful when students are active participants, but it took years to develop a reliable way to move my classes toward bright and timely discussions. Early on, when I posed problems or raised questions, my queries were met by tight lips and vacant stares; a painful brand of silence always blanketed the room. At first, I blamed the students. I thought it had to be their fault. I implicated the public schools. Then I added a few words about the all-purpose culprit—video games. I came up with several possible reasons for my failure, although, I was not featured in any of them. Then I found a passage in

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Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach* that helped me out of the blame game that I started. Palmer writes at length about facing silence in the classroom, but he doesn’t pin the blame on students, public schools, or video arcades. For Palmer, the explanation is universal, and it has to do with power:

> Students are marginalized people in our society. The silence that we face in the classroom is the silence that has always been adopted by people on the margin—people who have reason to fear those in power and have learned that there is safety in not speaking.¹⁴

As a young teacher, I took great pains to establish myself as an authority in the classroom. I marched into class in starched shirts and freshly pressed pants. I stood straight and tall at the head of the class and I ushered forth on all manner of topics. I strung words together in a fashion that would have made the publisher of *Roget’s Thesaurus* proud. It seemed like the responsible thing to do. If I was going to be a teacher, I thought I’d better act like one.

I didn’t realize it then, but I was usurping all of the power and all the potential for dialogue in class. If I was the final authority on every issue, what was left to discuss? Why bother? I could see students thinking, “If you’re so smart then why don’t you just tell us why air pollution is a problem, and why we make minimum wage, and while you’re at it, why don’t you explain how the health care system got to be such a fiasco?” And in the beginning, that’s what I did. I stood in front of large groups of students, stiff as a statue in my starched shirts, and I explained away all the world’s problems.
At this point in my career, I can admit that I’ve blown several opportunities to pull students into the dialogue, but I eventually came to realize that students cannot empower themselves. The social structure of the classroom does not allow it. At some point it occurred to me, if students were going to be active in the discourse, I was going to have to give up my position as the final authority on all matters sociological and acknowledge that my students’ ideas were valuable too.

In addition, I had the cleaners leave the starch out of my shirts, and I started wearing blue jeans and Birkenstocks to class. In short, I learned to be myself, and

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it worked. Palmer rightfully points out, “who you are” is just as important as “what” you teach or “how” you teach it. Curriculum is important, and good technique is critical, but your identity as a teacher is an equally vital element in the classroom experience.

As a teacher, your sense of self guides your actions, and others respond to you accordingly. Again, Palmer’s words serve as a testimony to the salience of “self” in education:

After three decades of trying to learn my craft, every class comes down to this: my students and I, face to face, engaged in an ancient and exacting exchange called education. The techniques I have mastered do not disappear, but neither do they suffice. Face to face with my students, only one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this ‘I’ who teaches. 15

We’ve done a great deal to banish the word “I” from the Ivory Tower. Students are taught to write in the third person, and scholars continue the tradition in professional journals across the academy. Given our ill feelings about anything written in relation to a self-referential “I,” it’s easy to see how young teachers might come to believe that they’re simply supposed to be well-dressed mouthpieces for their fields. In truth, one’s discipline must be a central part of one’s teaching practice, but if higher education is ever going to live up to its purpose as a vital, empowering institution, then being a teacher will have to mean more than being an expert.

Educators are the subject of countless books and articles, and in fairness to
many of the publications now available on the subject of teachers and teaching—
surveys, experiments, and classroom observations are all useful means to examine
the ways that we present ourselves to students. But in the end, our lives are like
long screenplays, and autobiographies are the best means we have to make those
screenplays public.

Autobiographies of college teaching are a gift to the profession. Through the
medium of story, autobiographers unveil their secrets, their foibles, and their
assorted accomplishments. From life-writing we stand to learn new perspectives,
fresh strategies, and we may find a new lease on our own identities. We may even
learn how to be ourselves, in a better sense.

Labor Day is closing in on me as I write. The clock on the wall in my make-
shift home office is spinning like a vortex and my wife just called me from the liv-
ing room. We’re meeting friends for lunch, so I need to get out of my robe and
into something more respectable. I holler, “One minute. I’m just about finished.”
Then I whisper, “I think I’ll wear my favorite shirt.” It’s a T-shirt that I bought at
a bookstore in St. Paul, Minnesota. On the front of the shirt there’s a black and
white picture of a cow grazing in tall grass. On the back, there’s a quote by the poet
Muriel Rukeyser. In The Speed of Darkness, she wrote, “The universe is made of
stories, not of atoms.”¹⁶ You could say the same about professors. ¹⁶

ENDNOTES
¹ Mills and Mills, 2000, 155.
² Palmer, 1999, 43.
³ Williams, 2001, 3.
⁵ Hanson, 2000, 1.
⁶ Kittredge, 1996, 158.
⁷ Ibid. 158-59.
⁸ hooks 1994, 7.
⁹ Ibid. 192.
¹⁰ Goldsmid and Wilson, 1980.
¹² Freire, 1970.
¹³ Shor, 1980, xxv.
¹⁵ Ibid. 10.
¹⁶ Rukeyser, 1968, 111.
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