RE-SEEING RESISTANCES: TELLING STORIES

I tried to explain the focus of this paper—the embodied theorizing about teaching I was trying to articulate, the lure of teacher stories about our “resistant” students that I wanted to understand—to my mother several weeks ago. She’s been a math teacher and a professional tutor for more than a quarter of a century. These years in a range of teaching positions have coalesced into what often seems to me an enviably uncomplicated theory of teaching: “You figure out what you want to happen in a class, what you want kids to learn, and then you try to find the best way to make that happen. Things don’t always work out like you planned, and you need to think about why that happens, too.”

“I’m writing about student resistance in the classes I teach,” I told her, “trying to think about roots of it and better ways to respond to it. I am going to call the paper ‘Re-Seeing Resistances.’ I want to think about the stories we tell and the metaphors we use.” She looked at me, blinking a few times. I tried again. “You know, when students resist you, when. . . .” Talking about Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, or Robert Brooke probably wouldn’t make this project any more transparent for her, and I couldn’t think of another way to explain the project except through stories that bordered on complaint.

Days later, she told me about a troubling student: distracted, unwilling to listen to her suggestions, complaining that the problems were too hard and had no purpose in the real world. “He’s wasting his parents’ money,” she sighed, “and he just won’t try.”

Resistance, I thought. You know it when you see it.¹

My mother has taught advanced classes at a small Catholic elementary school. She also does private tutoring for at-risk students from neighboring high schools and colleges in an affluent suburban area. I teach at a large public, urban university. She tutors Algebra through Calculus in a fairly traditional lecture-style format. I teach a range of classes from College Writing to graduate courses in composition theory. My students work in pairs and small groups, workshopping papers, experimenting with writing exercises, and revising their own texts. On the surface, our professional lives are very different. But the stories we tell are remarkably similar: our struggles with students who do not complete assignments.
or do not “participate” as we think they should; students who push back, withdraw, make trouble; students who seem determined not to learn.

Such stories seem to be an eternally present condition of my teaching life: in the hallways, at the copy machine, and between classes, there’s lots of teacher-talk about resistance. We love to talk about what students do and don’t do. We tell stories punctuated with despair, humor, even anger. Listeners play an important role in this ritual: nodding sympathetically and knowingly, sometimes sharing their equally epic classroom labors. (The pages of our professional journals are bursting with similar tales: Lad Tobin’s baseball hat-wearing, back-row dwellers; Joseph Trimmer’s students who find Henry James “a bore” [51]; the teachers in Elizabeth Rankin’s study who find students to be “aggressively apathetic” [1]; or Bonnie TuSmith, who hears racist hostility in her students’ silence—to name but a few in the staggering collection of teacher-tales of resistant students.) Soon after I started teaching, I grew uncomfortable with the ways our stories seemed to exaggerate the “stupid, beast-like, childish aspects of college writers” (Helmers 1), even while I knew we genuinely liked, even loved, these students we were demonizing. (Was there a student-equivalent, I wondered: in dorms or at the dining hall, were students telling stories about their comma-splice phobic, revision-obsessed, journal-crazy composition teachers?) I started to think these impromptu “can you top this?” contests might be the only way my colleagues and I could ever really talk about the struggles in our classrooms.

Over time, I began to see that such stories served critical functions for me. Venting frustration in safe ways, I heard practical strategies for managing classroom situations that baffled me. Further, as Marguerite Helmers argues, such negative representations in teachers’ narratives have the effect of exerting control; I noticed that I seemed to lapse into such unkind depictions only when I felt the least sense of authority in my own teaching life. And telling and hearing these stories helped me to feel part of a community of teachers whose professional lives had few cohesive moments. Likewise, reading that those compositionists whose work was shaping my own pedagogy faced resistance too reassured me; perhaps student resistance was not confined to the classrooms of the less experienced teachers, the young, the women, those without the visible signs of institutional authority. After one particularly virulent exchange of stories that transformed my after-class anxieties into something more manageable, I began to wonder if something else was at play in these stories. Perhaps these stories permitted me to ask the unspeakable: why do students resist? Why are students resisting me?

I realize that I’m already implicitly sliding here into a “me versus them” vocabulary (or a “we teachers, them students” one), a position I find fundamentally unsettling. Must we describe teacher-student relationships this way? Is this “me versus them” mentality merely a viewpoint (albeit one that feels natural to many of us), just one way of looking at the metaphor of resistance in the classroom? In the remainder of this essay, I examine several stories of resistance, ones that may feel disquietingly familiar, and try to read them through new lenses. In the
final pages, I return once again to the these stories for a third reading, a final attempt to make sense of them and reflect on the role such stories might play in our teaching lives.

Have you ever had the experience of telling a teaching-story and not remembering if it is your own, or if it's one you've heard so many times it just feels like it is yours?

The copy-room stories of resistance—those I tell myself, those I hear from my colleagues—melt into each other, become indistinct in a blur of student indiscretions and beleaguered teacher- hood. I've seen this student before, this behavior before; this student has done this in another class before. . . . Eventually almost every class moment fits itself neatly into a familiar genre: The-Class-That-Doesn't-Speak, Perpetually-Late-Paper-Guy, The-Student-Who-Says-“I-Don’t-Know.”

During my first semester of teaching, I found myself tragically disappointed by some minor but continual infraction of the classroom “rules” by one of the strongest students in the class; this crime was going to pull his grade down. An older colleague chuckled at my anxiety: “When you’ve taught as long as I have, it will get easier. You’ll realize this is nothing new.”

But shouldn't it be?

What is lost in seeing the pattern rather than the particular?

LESSONS IN RESISTANCE (I), IN WHICH I FIRST ENCOUNTER STUDENT RESISTANCE

I remember resistance from my elementary and high school days, even if we didn’t call it that. I think about Jonathon, who sat most days in the back corner of my third grade classroom. After Jonathon was guilty of some sort of “misbehaving”—not following directions, talking out of turn, pulling someone’s hair—the teacher would order him to move his desk to the “punishment seat” near the windows. Once moved, he seemed content, not chastened or humiliated as she’d clearly intended; he seemed far happier with his view of the parking lot.

I recall one lunch period when Jonathon (already relocated) calmly picked up his milk carton and tipped it over his head. When the teacher noticed, Jonathon jumped up, ran out of the room, out of the school, and (rumor had it) all the way home. Unsurprisingly, the next day, Jonathon’s desk was in the corner when the morning bell ushered us in.

Some years later, through the small town gossip-mill, I learned that Jonathon’s parents had essentially abandoned him to his grandmother while they negotiated a contentious divorce. Looking back, I wonder now if his outbursts and apparent lack of attention were perhaps more than “behavior problems” (the worst crime in my school), indications of a learning disability overlooked in the 1970s in a school that proudly did not have “special” classes.

I remember sixth grade when we endured a substitute for three months. No one thought to tell us she was there while our favorite teacher recovered from bypass surgery. At least once a week, someone devised a misguided plan
to torture her: dropping pencils at a designated time, insisting we had “free hour” every Friday, conveniently “forgetting” assignments. These synchronized resistances inevitably met with punishments of angry tirades, forfeited recesses, extra assignments, or threats to tell our parents. I don’t think any of us particularly enjoyed these rebellions or expected anything to come of them. So why, week after week, we reluctantly but dutifully followed these “great ideas,” I can’t fully explain. The real punishment came when our teacher returned to school and remarked that he was disappointed we had behaved so badly in his absence. The whole class, tough boys included, cried that day.

I remember my Catholic high school and its new avenues for resistances. I think about my lab partner brazenly forging his parents’ names on permission slips for field trips and making sure we all knew about it. I think about the host of small-scale rebellions that took place every day: reading biology notes during British Lit.; cutting Phys. Ed. to go to a café; wearing our uniform skirts marginally shorter than school rules permitted. Such resistances inevitably carried a price. We honors kids knew that. Lectures from the vice principal, detentions, and worst of all, lowered grades. These were supposed to deter us. But we resisted anyway, desperately trying to define ourselves in ways we hoped would make high school easier to survive.

How do you define student resistance? The shape of teacher-narratives provides several ready interpretations:

- Students are disengaged.
- Students are apathetic.
- Students don’t care about this class (their writing, their learning).
- Students don’t want to learn.
- Students are limit-testing.
- Students hate the class (writing, their teacher).

I know; I’ve told stories with these punch-lines, too. But hard as I might try, it is difficult to reconcile those teacherly explanations with my own student life. Do they really explain why, even as a pathologically good student, I secretly envied Jonathon’s escapes to his corner seat? Or why I took such profound pleasure in minute violations of an archaic and absurd dress code? Why do these explanations of resistance feel like they have so little to do with the student stories I tell, with the student I remember being? And if these explanations seem so inadequate, so wrong, how did I get from being that student to this teacher?

So for now, I’m struggling to resuscitate the term “resistance” to bridge this gap, to train myself to see beyond the limited definitions our stories allow.
“See how they resist each other?” I watched the demonstrations in my seventh grade science class with undisguised wonder, tuning out the explanation of the mechanics of magnetism and polarity. I ignored the larger scientific point my teacher was making and fixated on the almost magical properties I had seen acted out numerous times with refrigerator magnets.

Placed in one configuration, the magnets are attracted. (To my adolescent psyche, the fact that opposites can indeed attract seemed tremendously weighty and explained much about the world.) To overcome that force of attraction, some external intervention is needed. Rearranged, the magnets repel each other, maintaining a particular distance between them. While I’ve absorbed a bit more about how polarity and magnetism work, I confess that I’m still mesmerized by the way that powerful magnets will bounce off each other when you try to force them together.

That was the part that fascinated me most: it’s not simply that magnets, in this arrangement, don’t pull toward each other; they actively push each other away. A force that can’t be seen, only felt, controls how these objects interact with each other; how they behave with respect to each other. One magnet can cause the other to move through this force. And by a shift, the force of connection becomes its opposite, the cause of non-connection. Somehow the power to pull together is inextricably bound to the force that pushes apart.

Resistance and its partner: opposites that give shape to the universe hold it together really. Without them and the structure they provide, for example, planets (I’ve been told) would cease their rotation and revolution. An implosion? Planets jettisoning off into the far reaches of space?

Without resistance, there is chaos. I could never fully fathom the science of resistance—charged particles and force fields—but I’ve never forgotten it either. You know it when you feel it.

I wonder if those same properties I vaguely grasped in science class—attraction and resistance as inverted forms of one another; both bodies shaping their interaction; the gravitation toward one polar relationship or the other; that both the forces of resistance and attraction are necessary to maintain stability—might tell us anything about our classroom interactions and the properties of the teacher-student relationship.

My colleague told me about her class of pre-nursing students, all vying for admission into the university’s highly competitive program. Because most of these students were academically successful, the admissions process often depended on the recommendations of their professors.

My colleague found these students to be the most agreeable, accommodating class she’d ever taught. No one ever missed a deadline, shirked responsibilities on group work, or questioned her feedback or assignments. In short, they were the most compliant students. Ever. She jokingly called them her Stepford Students.
LESSONS IN RESISTANCE (III): WRITING RESISTANCE

I am resisting right now. I am supposed to be writing an article for a professional journal. After years of graduate school and conference presentations, after a dissertation and published pieces, I should know what academic discourse looks and sounds like. I do know. I’ve written it often and read a great deal more. But look at what I’ve done so far. This isn’t the way a paper is supposed to look: no linear structure, few citations, no apparent movement toward a traditional conclusion. (Yes, there will be some conclusions of sorts; just hang on.) Too many stories, too many chains of thought that link together without hierarchical arrangement, too much “I.”

Should I write more about James Berlin, Henry Giroux, Patricia Bizzell, or Ira Shor? Should I couch my reflections in more abstracted language so this piece isn’t about me or you or students, but about the idea or theory of resistance? Perhaps I could restructure this thinking and these questions into a linear, top-down argument that would wrap itself up into a tidy conclusion. But I would lose something critical in that choice. This slippery thing of student resistance, which often feels more than three-dimensional when I experience it, changes shape; it becomes flatter and more manageable when I write about it in my most “academic” of voices. So for now, I’m pulling at the loose threads in my thinking that cross each other, tangling up, weaving in and out of my teaching.

You know resistance when you write it.

Teacher-tales often paint resisting students as trying to push away from the teacher, from the class community, from the particular subject, from education itself. Michelle Payne’s “Rend(ering) Women’s Authority in the Writing Classroom,” Nancy Sommers’s “Editor’s Choice: The Language of Coats,” and Lad Tobin’s “Reading Students, Reading Ourselves” provide particularly good examples. But do our stories suggest what the partner-force to resistance is? What makes the “good student”? What classroom force parallels magnetism’s attraction?

From the implicit definition in our stories, the opposing concept would have to be a term that includes “non-action that pulls together”: passive compliance. But is the opposite of student resistance really compliance? (For those of us who see ourselves as critical teachers, I suspect this becomes tremendously complicated indeed.) And is compliance really the force that will make our classrooms productive? Should we teachers seek compliance?

After her semester with her nursing students, my colleague longed for students who didn’t meet every lesson, every question, and every assignment with pleasant smiles and the “right answer,” students who might have messy and disorganized, passionate and engaged papers. She craved students who wrestled with new ideas rather than simply agreeing with her perspective, students who would challenge her and force her teaching to grow.

Resistance. You know it when you miss it.

36 Composition Studies
I meet with my College Writing students nearly every week in individual conferences. The early meetings can often feel tense; students sometimes seem cautious, shy, tongue-tied. As some have told me, seeing a teacher outside of class time carries the weight of discipline—reminders of detentions and other punishments. I think many students simply don’t know what to expect. What do you do, talking to a teacher for 15 whole minutes? (The night before my first writing conference in college, I broke out in hives from sheer anxiety.)

And I’m nervous about student conferences, too: no matter how many years I teach, I worry that I won’t be able to put students at ease, ask the right questions, or think on my feet. Shy myself, I worry that we’ll have nothing to say or that I’ll talk entirely too much. And a conversation feels so much riskier than written feedback that I can revise, tweak, perfect. But conferences fit me better, fit my teaching better, I think. In one-to-one interactions, students can see possibilities, while my written feedback ends up looking like a list of directions no matter how I carefully phrase it. In trying to articulate their goals and choices, writers take on a new authority that I just can’t translate into other kinds of feedback. And I like the intimacy that develops from getting to know my students; I think I’m a better teacher for seeing my students as individuals.

Inspired by Don Murray, I try to get a student talking about her sense of the paper, its genesis, and the direction it might take. I don’t correct, fix, or direct, at least not in the early weeks of the semester. I ask many questions and hopefully say very little.

As the weeks unfold, I think students get more comfortable with these conferences. Students who are initially hesitant usually grow more confident as they begin to take a more assertive role in shaping our discussions. From course evaluations, I’ve learned that many students come to value this aspect of the class, even when they experience a rocky start.

Rob didn’t undergo this transformation. He was a kind of student I had grown wary of. Rushing a fraternity in his first semester, he wore baggy jeans and baseball caps pulled low over his eyes. He rarely offered anything beyond the briefest answer possible and never laughed at any of my jokes. In class, he had to be cajoled into joining group work, claiming he could do the assignments “better and faster” on his own. Week after week, our conversations felt stiff and uncomfortable: he didn’t seem interested in getting any more engaged and wouldn’t meet my eyes when we talked. And it only got worse from there. I asked Rob open-ended questions to get him talking about his draft, verbalizing his decisions about what went into the paper and his revision plans. Even students who didn’t “like” the class seemed to understand how to get by in conferences; Rob seemed uninterested or unwilling to even try.

“How did you come up with the idea for this paper?” I would ask, excited to hear about his first draft, thinking this would be the day we made a breakthrough.
His drafts always did seem thoughtful, full of promise; either he had to loosen up or I had to ask the magic question.

"I had to write something, so I did," sounding genuinely confused by the question.

"Well, what do you want this paper to accomplish?" A softball question he could surely answer.

Pause. "I don’t know. I just wanted to get it done."

"Hmm. What do you think works well in the draft?"

Longer pause. "Not much."

And so on. This happened for six or seven weeks. This was why many of my colleagues hated conferences. We’d have a short, painful meeting, rarely making it to the 10-minute mark. Then Rob would leave without, I think, much happening for him or his writing. I would make a check in my grade book to mark that he’d been there, and then I’d add a tiny pencil mark (−) next to it, to remind myself of how frustrated I’d been, how spiteful he’d seemed. Luckily for me, Rob’s conference slot was bracketed by two enthusiastic students who would bring energetic revisions each week, convincing me that it was indeed Rob’s fault those 15 (or 10 or 8) minutes were so disastrous.

And honestly, I just couldn’t understand Rob’s hostility. After my initial angst, my experience with writing conferences as an undergraduate had been one of the most powerful learning experiences of my life. Rob’s classmates blossomed with the individualized attention I could never provide in a class of 24 students. I believe that seeing their writing and their questions taken seriously by a teacher was—I hate to use this problematic term—an empowering experience. So how come Rob couldn’t see it, couldn’t appreciate the opportunity he had? Even self-proclaimed “non-writers” were usually won over by mid-semester, and we could have productive conferences that didn’t feel like dental surgery without anesthesia.

Rob’s conferences weren’t getting much better; if anything, they were getting worse. I began to resent the energy I was putting in trying to get him excited about his writing. Where was his resistance coming from? Did he resent a female teacher? One only a few years older than him? One who didn’t play a more traditional red-pen-wielding role? All of those things should have made me more approachable, but maybe they just made me look weak. I looked around the office that delineated my lowly status at the university—a room scarcely bigger than a broom closet, crammed with scarred desks and chairs and shared by three teachers, the steam-pipe running through the room providing unbelievable belches of heat, the flickering fluorescence of the overhead light—the residents of this room were clearly at the bottom of the institutional food chain.

Still, his resistance, his refusal to do this simple thing I asked of him—to talk about his writing—was infuriating. Why was I doing all the work?

Before long, I dreaded seeing Rob. One afternoon, I lost patience halfway through our tired, scripted dialogue. I asked questions; he answered minimally. I
encouraged; he stared at the floor. My temper had worn thin and I was dangerously close to overreacting, I knew. But his resistance to me, to the class, to writing had suddenly, overwhelmingly become intolerable. I wanted to scream. I wanted to be that teacher I still remember from elementary school, whose mere presence was so powerful no one dared defy her. I wanted a principal’s office I could send recalcitrant students to. I wanted to yell, “Give a damn about something!”

In a moment of which I am still ashamed, I couldn’t bear this, his resistance, anymore.

“Rob,” I snapped. “We’re not getting much out of this. Why don’t we just cut it short today?”

He finally looked at me, stunned. I was surprised to see his face.

“What?”

“I’m really tired and you don’t seem to be fully engaged, so let’s stop for today.” He got up slowly. At the door he turned and looked back at me. “I’m never sure what you want me to say here.”

When he left, I closed the door and put my head down on my desk. I had expected that I would feel vindicated: Rob knew his bad behavior was not acceptable any longer. Instead, for the first time, I was certain that I had failed irrevocably as a teacher.

Resistance. Rob’s anger and hostility manifesting itself through a cultivated passivity? A reaction to my lack of status in the university? Certainly I have told the story that way. But I am uncomfortable with this version of the narrative. In it, I become a victim of Rob’s perceptions (or my perceptions of Rob’s perceptions), rather than an active participant in the teacher-student relationship. And to see Rob’s silences as deliberately menacing confuses my feelings for his, much as I perceived Rob only through the lens of some “model student” who could (and would) smoothly adapt himself to my pedagogy.

Perhaps you read my story about Rob and see it as a relatively simple one: you can diagnose where I went wrong. Maybe I should have adapted my conferencing strategy with him and offered the directive feedback he needed or wanted. I lost my temper too quickly; I was overly sensitive and misread the perceived slights about my status. I should have been able to figure out how to transform his “not knowing what to say” into the kind of conversation I wanted to have. And maybe you think I’m making far too big a deal over one lost student, one missed opportunity.

All of those seem like plausible, if partial, interpretations. But each focuses on blame, much as my original version did; now I want to learn how to tell such stories better, more fairly, even if they are messier, more complicated. And the look of quiet sadness on Rob’s face as he left my office that afternoon haunts me more than the even the most openly argumentative or visibly threatening students I have worked with since.
So I want to shift the frame of resistance and move Rob and I beyond the “stock characters” (Helmers 2) in a predetermined plot I’ve written us into: surly, silent, unwilling student and well-meaning, good-hearted, thwarted teacher. In order to understand what happened that semester with Rob, perhaps it will be productive to use a different metaphor and consider the science of resistance that my first version of the Rob-story ignores.

Students are part of this resistance we are seeing, but so are teachers; I exerted at least as much (unproductive) force as Rob did. I wonder now how I may have fostered the resistance in our relationship through my own anxieties, fueled by previous experiences with students “like” Rob. While I want to believe I’m supremely fair and equitable, that I treated all students the same that semester, my body language, inflections, facial expressions, and other unconscious responses may well have betrayed my growing hostility. Further, as Richard Miller argues in “The Arts of Complicity,”

we can forget that we are the individuals vested with the responsibility for soliciting and assessing student work; we can imagine that power has left the room. . . . The students however never forget where they are, no matter how carefully we arrange the desks in the classroom, how casually we dress, how open we are to disagreement, how politely we respond to their journal entries, their papers, their portfolios. They don’t forget; we often do. (18)

While I’m skeptical that students never forget the institutional power we wield, Miller’s reflections remind us that students have a limited set of options open to them in our classrooms. In Rob’s case, I suspect the gestures I intended to feel “empowering” were experienced as some teacherly sleight-of-hand, a game he couldn’t quite grasp the object of, no matter how hard he tried. Altering the rules of how the teacher-student relationship is “supposed to work” isn’t always a simple and transparent change; as Rob pointed out, how are students “supposed to know what to say”?

Resistance becomes visible only in moments like this one with Rob or those with other “disruptive” students or in their inverse, as with my colleague’s “Stepford Students.” But aren’t all teacher-student relationships, including the productive ones, defined and ordered by a kind of polarity or balance, a sometimes-invisible tension? I don’t want to stretch the metaphor too far, and I think it’s overly simplistic to say there are only two possible configurations for teachers and students, that like magnets we either attract or repel each other in an all-or-nothing fashion. But I suspect the tensions in those relationships of more moderated compliance are harder to see: what force holds those teacher-student relationships in balance? While it’s easy to see the resistance of students like Rob as value-laden (he was Bad Student giving me a Hard Time), I think it’s more productive to understand this energy in terms of attraction and its opposing force, as an inherent part of this
relationship. Perhaps student resistance doesn’t have a “negative” charge as my story about Rob suggests. It simply is.

In that last look Rob gave me when he left my office that afternoon, it seemed clear to me for the first time that his so-called resistance wasn’t deliberate or malicious, as I’d begun to fantasize. It was, instead, a kind of (mis)alignment, an inability on both our parts to fall into the roles that I had set up for us. The force I exerted on Rob (and the confusion he experienced when the rules about being a good student had changed) left him appearing to be resistant. When I didn’t adapt, he couldn’t either.

I don’t mean to suggest that I see such conflicts as unalterable, such moments of resistance as unredeemable. To return for the last time to my science metaphor, like magnets, both teacher and student need to shift to realign their interaction. I cannot assume students will magically fall into a comfortable orbit around me. And had I been able to read the other cues in my conferences with Rob without an emotional overreading, I might have seen things differently. What I read as overt hostility now seems to me a profound discomfort at his own inability to please me, to be the good student who could give the teacher what she wants.

There’s more to the Rob story, more context I had not adequately or accurately read at the time, which I’ll return to later. But for now, I want to leave you where I was that afternoon, contemplating how to face those next 15 minutes alone with him.

LESSONS IN RESISTANCE (V): THE ROMANCE OF RESISTANCE

Fed by my impatience with dates, statistics, and “facts” that made history seem so remote from how I saw the world, I remember learning about The French Resistance in history class. We read in our textbooks a tiny little section about the European underground opposition to Nazi occupation—those citizens who covertly organized themselves to the fight the spread of an oppressive regime. The Resistance was about people, people who felt and suffered and acted. Thus began my unabashedly romantic view of underdogs and revolutionaries, real and fictional alike. That year, my literature class led me to A Tale of Two Cities, reinforcing my romantic notions about self-sacrifice, love, and duty in the mythic Sydney Carton.

Coincidentally, at about the same time I discovered old black and white movies and was charmed by Casablanca. While it’s not the most sophisticated thing to admit, I suspect this movie has shaped my impressions of what it means to be politically resistant more than anything I’ve read since then. I was smitten with the movie, all of it—Rick’s quiet nobility in doing The Right Thing, even when it didn’t appear to others that way; the expatriates’ defiant rendition of “La Marseillaise” to drown out the Nazis’ war songs; Ilsa’s overwrought decision between two lovers who represented two very different models of resistance; Laszlo’s showy politics.
So resistance, at least in Hollywood incarnations, novels, and high school textbooks, tapped into my love of stories and my theories about how the world should work—grand ones in which self-sacrifice is far more important than self-preservation. Honor. Liberation. Justice. These were the things we’re fighting for.

But maybe that depends on who is telling the story.

So I learned that resistance is a political and social act of subversion in the services of justice, despite the consequences to oneself. Certainly that’s the definition that we teachers apply to ourselves when we talk about our pedagogies and the ways we challenge cultural values and hegemonic practices. We resist what has come before us, what has reified the oppressive structures in our culture. We want to teach our students they should not unquestioningly accept and ingest what they are force-fed by the media, through political rhetoric, and in banking models of education. We see the world in more sophisticated, less comfortable ways, and we work to bring about change, even when others do not (or cannot) see that we are Right. So we question what it means to be literate; the traditional kinds of texts deemed “appropriate” for the composition class; the practices to teach writing, literacy, and citizenship. Challenging as it might be, we believe we can change the world one composition class at a time. Our theorizing and our practices allow us to celebrate ourselves, the risks we take, and the liberatory changes we want to bring about.

But once again, maybe that definition of resistance depends on who is telling the story.

ANOTHER TEACHER TALE, OR LESSONS IN RESISTANCE (VI)

My college education was fairly traditional. Even in seminars, it was pretty clear what the right answers were—the professor’s. No one had consulted me about my educational needs or the generative themes that would affect my own personal growth, and as far as I could tell, no one much cared about developing my voice. Compliant student that I was, I was determined to be the Best Student that ever lived and breathed in that English Department, even if that meant ignoring the uncomfortable sense of disconnection I felt the longer I was in school and with each “success” I accrued. A composition theory class in grad. school felt like a naughty secret: could a revolutionary pedagogy really work? Did the other professors know about this—students writing about topics that mattered to them, talking to each other about that writing, getting feedback without grades, and then revising what they thought was important?

Armed with Freire and hooks, Elbow and O’Reilley, I approached my grad. school teaching assignments with something like a missionary zeal: I was going to Liberate those students. Teaching writing would be about far more than producing grammatically correct prose and well-researched thesis papers; this was a chance to do something that mattered. The skeptical voices of my peers
and some comp scholars didn’t bother me. Why wouldn’t students want to be Liberated? It would be good for them; they would believe me, right? It was only in the logistics of this liberation that I began to flounder. How exactly would I accomplish these noble goals of mine?

Fortunately, I was studying and teaching in a carefully designed program that provided graduate students extensive training and support for implementing the model of writing pedagogy the program espoused. For example, in keeping with the idea that writing is a social and recursive act, students were asked to draft and revise, utilizing frequent peer feedback sessions. Seeing one’s writing through the eyes of a stable peer audience would help writers to develop, expand, articulate, and clarify; students were asked to provide descriptive feedback modeled on Elbow and Belanoff’s Sharing and Responding. Experienced teachers shared their ideas and handouts, so that by the end of my teaching orientation, I had a proven model and a carefully color-coded folder of peer-feedback options for every essay my class could write. (If there were a hero in any of the teaching stories I told in those years, it would be the Writing Program in which I taught. A clear vision, strong leadership, and carefully articulated practices allowed me to pass as a reasonably competent teacher most of the time.)

My class spent lots of time at the beginning of the semester “training”: learning how to read and respond thoughtfully and productively to each other’s drafts. I was always careful to show examples of “good” feedback and the results as well, to persuade even the most skeptical students of the value in reading each other’s work. I would visit the groups in progress, trying to “facilitate” (probably trying too hard). And I’d read each sheet students filled in, commenting on their comments to teach in order to better respond and to help students revise their own work. Looking back now, I’m a little surprised I didn’t go blind in the reams of reading I assigned myself in those early years. With time, I made innovations: deviating from the standard questions the Writing Program had suggested, rotating students through groups instead of insisting on stable ones. (Yes, my boldness was astonishing.) After the early weeks of the semester, peer feedback sessions generally ran smoothly. Students grew more confident reading their drafts aloud, and filling in the peer feedback sheets I’d borrowed-constructed no longer seemed so onerous as students learned the limits of what they could and should say. Subsequent discussions grew easier too, as students seemed to genuinely enjoy talking to each other about their drafts, often provoking discussions and questions they brought to the whole class. I suspected that part of why this worked so well was the sense of trust it fostered in students—in their own abilities to compose and comment, think and talk.

Oh yes, we were well on our way to the contained Writers’ Liberation I’d imagined for my students.

One semester it didn’t work that way. Rather than becoming more comfortable responding to each other, my students seemed to be offering shorter and less productive feedback. Some told me individually that they weren’t finding it
helpful in revising their essays. Given the kinds of responses they were receiving, I wasn’t surprised. I mentioned this to the whole class, trying to resuscitate the excitement I’d perceived at the beginning of the semester. I encouraged (“if you give good feedback, people will feel obligated to do the same”); I threatened (“it counts towards your grade”); I begged. I tried to convince myself that it was just a mid-semester slump.

One day when I announced that we would be spending the rest of the class period in peer response groups, several students grimaced openly. Others audibly groaned. My impulse—not an admirable one—was to paste on a giant phony grin and forge ahead. My students were generous and willing to try almost any new exercise or assignment, so nearly every class felt like at least a modest success. If they were so unhappy, if I couldn’t implement a tested-and-perfected practice, what did that say about me as a teacher?

“What’s wrong?” I asked, feeling like I was facing down a firing squad.

No one would answer.

“Should we move ahead to small groups then?” The anxiety shook in my suddenly-small voice.

Still no answer. It was starting to look like a bad movie rendition of what lame teachers look like. I could feel the first drops of sweat coalesce. They were rebelling, revolting against any shred of anti-authoritarian authority I had. My class was not supposed to happen that way. Somehow, they had staged a coup and my teacher-nightmare was materializing. They had challenged me and there was nothing I could do. They realized I was a fraud and all I could do was watch the disintegration. I wondered if this was what it felt like to go skydiving and realize that your parachute is temporarily stuck. Or that you don’t have one.

Hold on, I thought. I was the cool teacher, the anti-authoritarian, let’s-sit-in-a-circle, you-can-call-me-by-my-first-name, let’s-talk-about-it teacher. Had I ever forced them to do something terrible or unpleasant, just because I could? How could they be resisting me? Were we doing feedback because it’s liberatory, dammit. It was good for them. I could just as easily have given them a grammar quiz, taken those papers home, and marked them up with a red pen.

Breathe. “Is it that you don’t want to do peer response, or you don’t want to do it today, or is it something else I’ve missed entirely?” Nothing. Would we just sit there in uncomfortable silence for the rest of the class? Would it set a terrible precedent if I caved in and did something else in the remaining 45 minutes? What if I insisted they get in groups right now?

After a very long silence, to my great surprise, someone spoke. Other voices bubbled up: they didn’t want to give only written feedback; they wanted to have a chance to have a discussion about all the drafts. I always assigned the groups and never let them figure out with whom it would be good or useful or interesting to work. I was asking all the questions. I was asking questions that didn’t always apply. I said I wanted them to become self-reliant and to write for
themselves and their own criteria and their own purposes, but I wasn’t letting them do that.

Resistance, I thought: it’s a whole different story, isn’t it?

Resistance. It’s far more manageable if I can dismiss it as petty insubordination and limit-testing, just bad kids trying to push my buttons. It is much easier for me to think of my peer-response protesters in those terms: students who were trying to get out of doing the hard work of the class, students who wanted to see what they could get away with, how far they could push me, while I was benevolent but misunderstood, facing unwarranted revolt. Couldn’t they see I was asking them to do something that was genuinely good for them? (The irony of this, given the stories I’ve told about my own experiences as a student, is not lost on me.)

So what do I do with my students’ protests and their “bad behavior” that so derailed me as a new teacher? I’d like to say that experience has taught me supreme grace in dealing with these kinds of open revolts, or better yet, the skill to avert them completely. But part of this project is to be honest with myself about student resistance and the stories I tell about it and to try to find a new, more useful vocabulary for framing these experiences.

Geoffrey Chase distinguishes between “opposition” and “resistance”: “opposition . . . is student behavior which runs against the grain and which interrupts what we usually think of as the normal progression of learning,” while resistance is “students’ refusal to learn in those cases in which the refusal grows out of a larger sense of the individual’s relationship to liberation” (15). Chase’s definition would allow me to dismiss these students as merely engaged in oppositional behaviors, gumming up the smooth working of my pedagogy by willfully and thoughtlessly acting out. Convenient and comforting as this distinction might be, I’m not sure that’s an entirely fair assessment. I’m uncomfortable with a schema that seems to leave students little room to respond negatively without their comments being seen as petty insubordination: in what situations would we be likely to see our own students’ actions as directed toward “liberation”? (Wouldn’t that imply students need to be liberated from us?) We seem to be foreclosing on genuine, positive student resistance when we define our key terms this way. Likewise, Chase’s definition also implies that genuinely revolutionary aims cannot grow out of “mere” opposition, a claim that also seems troubling to me. Even if my students’ sighs and eye-rolling began as “just” running against the grain, couldn’t this opposition lead to more profound consequences if taken seriously?

Who gets to define the differences between opposition and resistance? In Chase’s definition, and in most teaching-narratives, only the teacher-narrator has that power. But can she accurately assess that? Can she determine students’ motives when she has so much at stake in constructing that highly charged moment of classroom malfunction? I suspect that in telling our stories, we get caught up in what it feels like to be us in these classroom moments and mistake this for Truth.

Re-Seeing Resistances 45
With my peer responders, I could see only my own profound, paralyzing angst when I perceived my students to be turning on me, challenging the practices designed to Liberate them. So I am troubled by another possibility. What if my students' groaning and eye-rolling was justified? What if opposition is resistance by another name? What might it mean to see such student resistance as a kind of political action to change those circumstances that seem unreasonable, even unbearable? What does it mean to take students' resistances seriously? Where does that leave me and the stories I tell?

I couldn't see my students' sides of this story, ones that might focus on my hypocrisy or misguided attempts to coerce them into behaving in the ways I'd decided they should want to. Just as those stories about the French Revolution and the Resistance of World War II that taught me so much about the romance of resistance were situated in particular viewpoints, my stories of resistance would become something very different if they were told by another narrator. To genuinely understand the stories of resistance we tell, we need to engage multiple point of view, to teach ourselves new ways of seeing the contested space of the classroom. We need to acknowledge that students have their own stories to tell about resistance in the classroom, and, difficult as it may be, we need to listen.

Taking student resistance seriously can be particularly problematic for those of us who see ourselves as engaged in thoughtfully student-centered, liberatory pedagogies. It challenges our very self-definition to acknowledge students may see themselves as needing to resist us. But to truly be revolutionary, student-centered, democratic, engaged teachers, we cannot listen to our stories alone.

**WHAT IF?**

I have been holding back, pushing against my narrative impulse to tell you the conclusions to the stories I have told. On an earlier draft, one reader wrote in the margins of the Rob-story, “What next?!!!” (Those exclamation points make me think others might want some resolution too.) I'm pushing back, too, against an impulse to declare, “I've figured student resistance out. Here are the four things you need to think about in order to understand your students and the way you can avoid or embrace or work through their resistances.”

But I haven't written toward that sort of closure, so I'm going to resist any easy answers. I wasn't the hero in those stories I told, and I don't want to paint myself as one in this meta-narrative either. I think we tell our teaching stories as a way to simplify the messiness of a classroom; as Marguerite Helmers writes, “It is easy for us to become complacent about the ways we talk about students... Facile labeling enables us to get on with the business of teaching” (98). I want to argue that perhaps this narrative discomfort is the point; our stories should lead us back into what is messy, unfinished, lacking a tidy resolution in teaching. We shouldn't find it so easy to tell these stories and dismiss these troubling moments. So what I am left with is these unfinished stories, some speculations, and even
more questions about what it means to be resistant and how we represent this experience to ourselves, to our students, and to each other.

Here’s the “what next” portion of my student stories.

Distance from those “resistant students” I knew—or was—in elementary and high school has changed my perceptions of them. I see them differently now: my lab partner’s parents couldn’t speak English; the foolish insurrections staged by my sixth grade class are sodden with our sense of loss and uncertainty (what did we think would happen if we had succeeded? That the substitute would run screaming from the building, never to darken our favorite teacher’s desk again, seems highly unlikely). Although I don’t see my verboten skirt-shortening as parallel to the likely learning disability Jonathon suffered, I do see a common thread: what looked like transparently “bad” behavior signified much more that went recognized. There was another story to be told. And the efforts to control the symptoms of resistance seem to have solved little in the end.

While I now have greater sympathy for my former teachers, I also see why it was so important to resist and why the consequences mattered so little. At the same time, I’m haunted by the gap between who I was then and how I see my own students now. I’m left trying to mediate these versions of myself and struggling to tell these stories that used to seem so easy, chastened by the knowledge that what looks like simple (even pointless) resistance often signifies a great deal more.

What if we told other kinds of resistance stories? Instead of those that rely on stock characters, demonize our students, and position us as beleaguered heroes, we might find fresh—and ultimately more useful—ways to talk about what happens in our classrooms. When I began this project, I thought that I could write myself out of using this metaphor of resistance, that I could find revolutionary ways of talking about the teacher-student relationship. In this I failed: the trope is more deeply rooted in my teaching-psyche than I could have imagined. It has helped me a great deal, however, to try to move beyond those definitions permeating our narratives that equate student resistance with blind opposition. In opening up the term “resistance” to consider how other metaphors—like its scientific applications or the romantic-political visions—can both inform and problematize my storytelling, I think I’ve become a better teacher, too. That is, understanding the science and the romance of resistance (particularly in self-representations) helps me to reconceptualize what is happening when I want to label—and dismiss—students as “just” resistant.

In The Call of Stories, Robert Coles quotes William Carlos Williams: “Their story, yours, mine, it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.” Coles continues, “Such a respect for narrative, as everyone’s rock bottom capacity, but also as the universal gift, seems altogether fitting” (30). I think we may forget this, falling back on the other functions that teaching narratives may serve for us. I want
to argue that we can indeed learn from carefully-told narratives, particularly from the stories we rarely hear. For example, beyond problematizing our definitions of resistance, I suspect there is much to be learned from critical examinations of teaching success that mark a different kind of classroom resistance. (Perhaps it feels self-congratulatory or frivolous to reflect on these moments.) Likewise, I think there is a host of untold resistance stories we may be afraid to talk about. (Why, as Robert Yagelski’s “The Ambivalence of Reflection” asks of us, are there so few stories about the challenges of teaching graduate students?) What if we can teach ourselves new ways to understand the forces of resistance if we are, in Robert Coles’s words, willing to share this universal gift?

Further, I think we need to train ourselves to stop reading our teaching narratives primarily in terms of their patterns. While there is something tremendously comforting in the solidarity that emerges in shared experience (virtually every reader of this piece has commiserated over their own “Rob” or their unwilling peer responders) or in the feeling that a classroom situation is manageable because it is analogous to another, I think we miss a crucial opportunity. Reading the patterns of stories seems to me much like reading the first paragraph of Luisa’s paper on bulimia and photocopying the feedback I wrote for Jennifer, who suffers from an eating disorder. Both papers might indeed have similar issues—an initial lack of focus or an unsupported thesis about the media’s culpability or an overabundance of details about the daily struggles the young woman faced. How about DeShaun’s paper on gun control? I could just borrow the response my colleague thoughtfully composed for her student, particularly since I’ve had more than my share of papers like this one. Does this analogy make the problem clearer? Patterns are useful only insofar as they illuminate, but they can obscure our vision as well. Students and classroom moments become static, categorizable, reducible to their common denominator; they are no longer organic, living entities that are fundamentally unlike any other.

Finally, the “what next” portion of my teaching stories. In both, what changed most were my own perceptions. In writing these stories and listening to the responses of others, I have come to see these moments of resistance and the ways I tell the stories in new and hopefully deeper ways.

So what happened next is that I thought. A lot.

I thought about Rob’s behavior and my unfortunate, too-personal response to it. I thought about how much I resisted having conferences with him. I thought about the spoiled frat-boy niche I had put him into and how that had probably colored my perceptions of him. I thought about all the times I passed my classroom 10 or 15 minutes before class, and I would see him there, notebook out, reading his draft. I thought about how he’d described his previous writing experiences: assignments that seemed unconnected from his experience and knowledge, teacher comments that left him certain of his own inabilities. I thought about his respectful responses to other students’ writing, his careful
reading of my feedback to him, his quiet pride in his research paper. I tried to understand why his conference-self seemed so different from his classroom-self. And ultimately, I thought about all the ways I might be affecting Rob's behavior and how I might be misreading him, too.

I'd like to say that I knew how to fix things with Rob and that the next week I asked the magic questions that smoothed out the rift between us, sparking a non-stop, generative conversation. I'd like to say I became Super-Teacher to his Wonder-Student. But in truth, I think we both endured the rest of the semester the best we could, carefully retreating from that one horribly revealing moment. Rob continued to try to do what I asked, even if that never seemed clear to him, even if he never seemed to completely trust me again. I tried to balance all that I knew about Rob the student, not Rob, a kind of student. To be a good teacher for Rob, I needed to change somehow, to find a new way to conceptualize the resistance between us productively and shift our relationship from one characterized by seemingly opposing forces to one where our energies were working together.

With my peer response protestors, I thought about their implicit demands: that I should change the way I ran things, give up some control, and match my classroom practice with the theories I espoused. I thought about the courage it must have taken to ask for change rather than to resent me and what I asked of them. I thought about how their resistance didn't just disrupt a lesson plan; it shook my self-image as a "radical" teacher. I thought about how open resistance marked these students' engagement and how I ultimately became a better teacher for it. And together with my students, I began to think about what made good peer feedback, as we experimented with different styles of responding.

In an earlier draft of this paper, I wrote that "even though we collaboratively negotiated how peer response would happen, collectively coming up with useful questions, leaving space for others, experimenting with different structures including self-selected groups, peer response did not radically transform itself."

But that's not entirely true either. I still find myself wanting to have a tidy ending (I did the radical-teacher thing of negotiating the syllabus and it didn't work; I can safely go back to teaching in the way that was comfortable). It's true that my students didn't give each other the kind of feedback that I wanted them to give, that I thought they should want. I found it difficult to micro-manage when some groups chose to have a conversation about their drafts (what was I going to look at?!), others focused on heavy-duty editing (that should come only at the end!), and some students simply wanted metaphorical reader-responses. But my students did experience this as radically different. Not only did their revisions and final papers improve, they also identified peer feedback sessions as one of the strongest aspects of the class. Many told me that they set up similar groups with friends and dormmates for other papers. And their resistance led me to growing pains: I had to figure out how to fit their resistances into both my self-image as a teacher and a structured approach to teaching that I was certain "should" work.
Much as I wanted an easy answer for this teacher-tale, I can’t have it. 
So this contradiction should matter in my telling of this story, too.

Finally, I can now see I made a tremendous mistake in believing these stories of resistance were mine alone. What if I had asked my students for their stories of resistance? How might those conferences with Rob have gone differently had I asked him for his impressions of those weekly 15-minute sessions? How might those peer feedback sessions have changed if I had asked for my students’ input, rather than expecting they would simply accept the directives I gave them? I suspect neither situation would have escalated as they had. In responding as I did, believing it was my story to tell and my crisis to solve, I fostered the me-versus-them dynamic.

Readers have suggested to me that not every student has the capacity to articulate “the problem” with a particular class dynamic or to propose alternatives. Point well taken. But each student can tell you her story. And we are trained readers: we know how to listen for the gaps in an essay, to listen for what is not yet there, and what it can become. I believe we should apply this same skill to our students’ stories of resistance in the classroom to shift our combative, antagonistic stance into something more genuinely communicative. As Robert Coles reflects, this “rock bottom capacity” for narrative to be shared seems altogether fitting, particularly in the composition classroom. Although this is not the only solution, this has taken the form of “open letters” in my class, in which one can tell her story to the class and invite our anonymous responses; I re-present these to the whole class as a basis for discussion. This strategy is by no means perfect, as it is usually me who initiates these conversations, even when it appears that students are uncomfortable with some aspect of the class. On the other hand, it has helped me more successfully navigate—not avoid—the kinds of resistances I faced with Rob and with my peer responders.

Notes

1 This work was supported (in part) by a grant from the City University of New York PSC-CUNY Research Award Program. I want to thank my colleagues, Kate Dionne and Pam Weisenberg. This paper grows out of numerous discussions with them, as well as several conference presentations in our search to understand the “everyday” student behaviors we saw in our classrooms. Our discussions were inflected by our readings of Robert Brooke’s “Underlife and Writing Instruction,” in which he speaks of student resistance (“underlife” behaviors: those that fall outside the proscribed limits placed on students) as a process of constructing identities—a drive to include more or alternate identities that aren’t allowed in the classroom.

I would also like to thank Michael Reda and Greg Tulonen for their help with this paper, as well as the various readers whose comments have pushed my
thinking further about both student resistance and the value of storytelling. Finally, I am grateful to my colleagues who have shared their stories of difficult classroom moments; hearing their stories has nurtured my interest in how we use such teaching narratives.

Joseph Trimmer's *Narration and Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*, Duane Roen, Stuart Brown, and Theresa Enos's *Living Rhetoric and Composition*, and Richard Haswell and Min-Zhan Lu's *Comp Tales* are narrative collections that attempt to look at issues in composition through a range of narrative forms. They suggest a growing disciplinary interest in narrative. *Comp Tales* is particularly interesting as each “tale” is followed by a brief commentary by the author, sections by an editorial comment, suggesting that the narratives can be (or should be?) read in a particular way.

**WORKS CITED**


