

Getting Off the Track: Stories from an Untracked Classroom

By Bill Bigelow

In school, I hated social studies. My U.S. history class was, in the words of critical educator Ira Shor, a memory Olympics, with students competing to see how many dates, battles and presidents we could cram into our adolescent heads. My California history class was one long lecture, almost none of which I remember today, save for the names of a few famous men — mostly scoundrels. This marathon fact-packing was interrupted only once, as I recall, by a movie on raisins. Social studies — ostensibly a study of human beings — was nothing of the kind. “Poor History,” writes Eduardo Galeano, “had stopped breathing: betrayed in academic texts, lied about in classrooms, drowned in dates, they had imprisoned her in museums and buried her, with floral wreaths, beneath statuary bronze and monumental marble.”

Today, students who prove unresponsive to similar memory games are often labeled “slow learners,” — or worse — and find themselves dumped in a low-track class, called “basic” or “skills,” understood by all as “the dumb class.” This is classic victim-blaming, penalizing kids for their inability to turn human beings into abstractions, for their failure to recall disconnected factoids. And it’s unnecessary. Tracking is usually advocated with good intentions; but its only educational justification derives from schools’ persistence in teaching in ways that fail to reach so many children, thus necessitating some students’ removal to less demanding academic pursuits.

Untracking a school requires untracking instruction. Unfortunately, many of those who argue against tracking offer only the vaguest hints of what an effective untracked class could look like. Hence their critique that tracking

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delivers inferior instruction to many students, lowers self-esteem, reproduces social hierarchies, reinforces negative stereotypes, etc. may have ironic consequences. Compelled by these and other arguments, schools that untrack without a thoroughgoing pedagogical transformation can end up simply with a system of tracking internal to each classroom. I’ve seen this in more than one “untracked” school: students who come to class able to absorb lectures, write traditional research papers, memorize discrete facts — and stay awake — succeed; those who can’t, sit in the back of class and sleep, doodle, or disrupt — and fail. Those of us critical of tracking need to offer a concrete and viable vision of an untracked classroom. Otherwise, the results of untracking will replicate the results of tracking, and many educators will lean back in their chairs and say, “I told you so.”

Components of an Untracked Classroom

As a classroom teacher, I’ve found that an anti-tracking pedagogy has sev-

eral essential and interlocking components. And while the examples I’ll use are drawn from my high school social studies classes, these components remain as valid in other content areas or can be adapted.

- **Show, don’t tell.** Through role plays, improvisations, and simulations students need to *experience*, not simply hear about, social dynamics.

- **Assignments need to be flexible enough to adjust to students’ interests or abilities.** Teachers can assign projects, poetry, personal writing, critiques, etc. which allow students to enter and succeed at their own levels of competence and creativity. This is not a suggestion to give easy assignments, but to adopt a flexible academic rigor. And in no way should this detract from students developing traditional scholastic skills they will need to pursue higher education.

- **The curriculum needs to constantly draw on students’ lives as a way of delving into broader social themes.** Knowledge needs to be both internal and external; history, government, sociology, literature is always simultaneously about “them” and us.

- **The classroom environment needs to be encouraging, even loving.** All students need to know that their potential is respected, that they are included in a community of learners. A rhetoric of caring is insufficient. Both the form and content of the class must underscore every child’s worth and potential.

- **What we teach has to matter.** Students should understand how the information and analytic tools they’re developing make a difference in their lives, that the aim of learning is not just a grade, simple curiosity, or “because you’ll need to know it later.”

• **An anti-tracking pedagogy should explicitly critique the premises of tracking.** Students need to examine the history and practice of tracking in order to become aware of and expel doubts about their capacity to think and achieve. We cannot merely untrack our classrooms; we have to engage students in a dialogue about *why* we untrack our classrooms. More than this, the curriculum needs to critique the deeper social inequities and hierarchies that were the original stimulus for tracking and continue today to breed unjust educational practices.

• **Finally, the method of evaluating students in an untracked class should embody the flexibility and caring described above.** We can't advocate creating flexible assignments that adjust to students' interests and abilities and then hold youngsters accountable to rigid performance criteria. Evaluation needs to be guided by principles of equity rather than efficiency.

The power of an anti-tracking approach lies in the interrelationship of

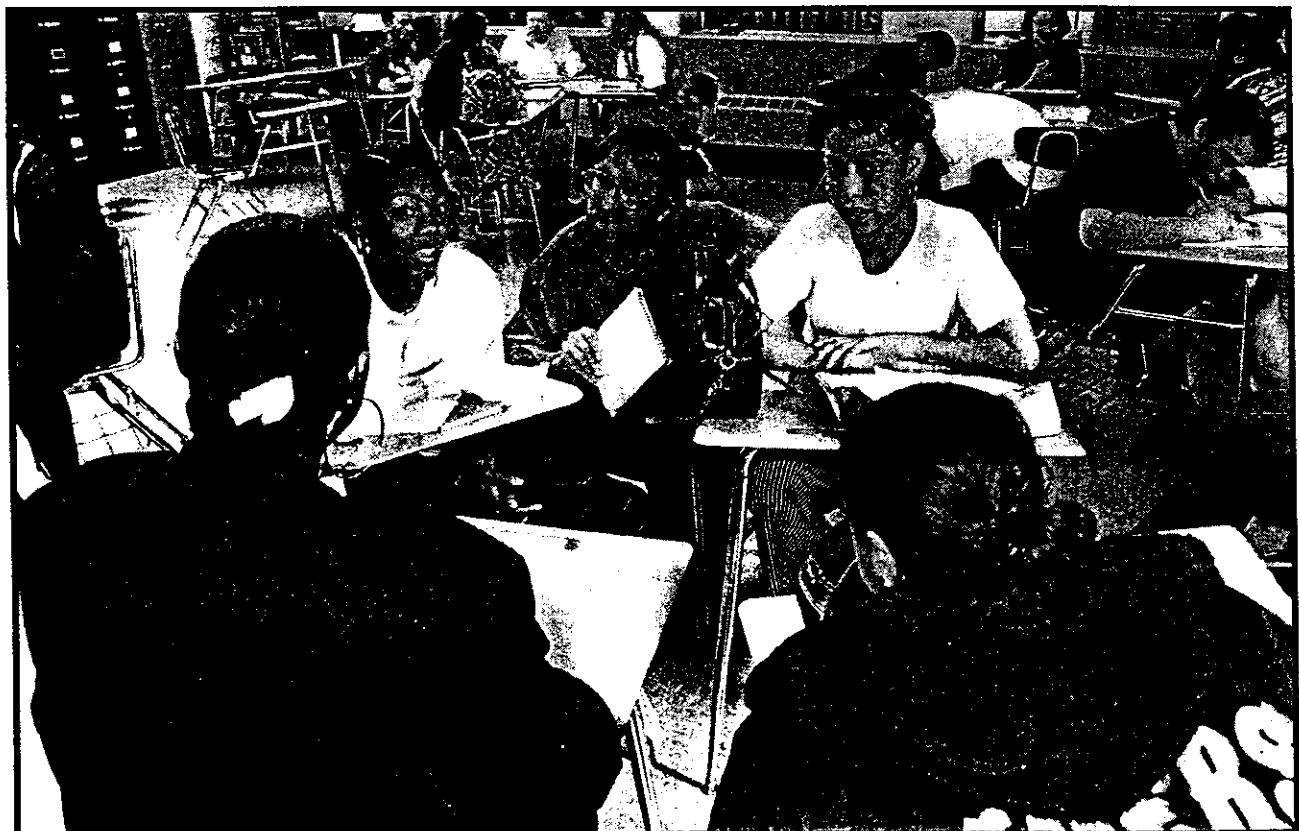
these components, not in merely applying them checklist fashion. Lest my examples sound too self-congratulatory or facile, I should begin by confessing that all this is easier said than done, and my classroom is rarely as tidy as my written descriptions. My students, just like everyone else's, get off task, hold distracting side conversations, and often fail to complete their homework. The aim here is not to provide a cookbook of tried and true educational recipes but to contribute to a broader discussion about how we can teach for justice in an unjust society, and to explore how such a commitment can contribute to successful classroom practice.

Bringing the Curriculum to Life

Role plays, simulations, and improvisations allow students to climb into history and social concepts and to explore them from the inside. It's a first-person approach to society that gives each student an equal shot at grasping concepts and gaining knowledge. Students who are advanced in traditional

academic terms are not held back with this more experiential approach, but neither are they privileged by their facility with, say, Standard English or their stamina in reading and memorizing textbookspeak. Just about every unit I teach includes at least one role play, simulation, or set of improvisations.

For example, in a unit on U.S. labor history, students role play the 1934 West Coast longshore strike (see *The Power in Our Hands*, pp.74-77 and 148-163.) In five groups — longshoremen, waterfront employers, farmers, unemployed workers and representatives of the central labor council — students confront the choices that confronted the original strike participants. From each group's respective standpoint students propose solutions to the strike, decide whether they want the governor to call in the national guard to protect strikebreakers, and determine how they will respond if the guard is called upon. Not all groups have clear positions on the questions and so students have to use their creativity to design potential resolutions and their per-



Bill Bigelow listens to social studies students.

93

suasive powers to build alliances with members of other groups.

The dynamics of the strike are lived in the classroom, experienced firsthand by students, instead of being buried in the textbook. Longshoremen negotiate with farmers to support the strike, waterfront employers seek to entice the unemployed with offers of work, and more than one group threatens violence if the governor calls in the guard. Students must master lots of information in order to effectively represent their positions, but it's not just a memory olympics — they have to use the information in the heat of deal-making and debate.

Most students have a great time, running around the room negotiating and arguing with recalcitrant peers; often, students remain engaged after the bell rings. But the role play is not simply play. As Paulo Freire says, "Conflict is the midwife of consciousness," and the simulated conflict in role plays like this allows students to reflect on much larger issues: When are alliances between different social groups possible? What role does the government play, and should it play, in labor disputes? Is violence or the threat of violence justified in class conflict? Can people be out for themselves, but also support each other? These are big and tough questions, but because they draw on an experience every student watched and helped create, they are concrete rather than abstract. Regardless of past academic achievement, the activities and discussion challenge every student.

These and other questions can also lead us to explore the contemporary relevance of the 60 year-old-strike. Often students-as-longshoremen cobble together an alliance including farmers, the unemployed, and the central labor council. What do you think happened in real life? I ask. "Sure we can get together," many a student has responded. "But we're just in a role play in a classroom. It's easy to get together in here. I don't think it could happen in real life." Most students are surprised to learn that it *did* happen in real life — working people in 1934 maintained a remarkable degree of solidarity. And from this knowledge we discuss when people can

and cannot get together. Students also reflect on their own cynicism about people's capacity to unite for worthy goals.

After the role play I sometimes ask students to relate our discussion to their lives, and to write about a time when they were able to stick together with a group for a common objective. In our class read-around the next day I encourage students to take notes on common themes they hear in each other's stories. Here, too, we can continue to pursue theoretical questions about unity, but it's a pursuit rooted in our experience, not one imposed on a class as an abstract academic inquiry. It is serious academic work, democratized through students' in-class experience and its connection to their lives.

Improvisation and Equal Access to the Curriculum

Improvisation is another kind of "leveling" role play that seeks to give all students equal access to information and theoretical insight. In a unit on U.S. slavery and resistance to slavery, I provide students with a set of first person roles for different social groups in the South, which supplements information already gleaned from films, a slide-lecture, poetry, a simulation, readings, and class discussions. They read these roles and in small groups select from a list of improvisation choices. They can also create their own improv topic or combine some of mine to form something new.

The topics are bare-bones descriptions requiring lots of student initiative

to plan and perform. For example:

- A plantation owner tells a mother and father, who are enslaved, that he's going to sell their children. He needs the money.

- An enslaved person encounters a poor white farmer on the road. The farmer accuses the slave of looking him directly in the eye, which is illegal.

- An enslaved person asks an owner if she/he can buy her or his freedom.

There's an obvious danger that students' performances of these and any role plays can drift toward caricature. Caricature may allow students to distance and insulate themselves from the enormity of the subject, but it can also allow them to trivialize one of the most horrendous periods in human history. However, the alternative of students remaining outside, removed from a subject like the enslavement of African people, seems to me a greater danger. So we talk about how we can't possibly know what people experienced, but through our performance, imagination, writing, and discussion we're going to do the best we can. And students have responded with passionate skits that have moved many in the class to tears — that have, in Toni Morrison's words, given "voice to the 'unspeakable.'"

As students perform the improv I ask them to take notes on powerful lines or situations, as they'll be writing from the perspective of one or more of the characters. After each skit we discuss the problem posed, and how students handled it. As we progress, I draw on their improv to teach about laws, different forms of resistance, how certain practices varied from region to region or in different time periods. It's a series of mini-lectures, but accessible to all students because they are linked to a shared experience.

Afterward I ask students to write an interior monologue — the inner thoughts — from the point of view of one of the characters in an improv. People have the freedom to write from the point of view of a character they represented or one they watched. I encourage students to "find your passion," as my teaching partner, Linda Christensen, likes to say — so they're free to rearrange and massage the as-

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SAN FRANCISCO ARCHIVES, SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY

Strikers battle police during San Francisco general strike, July 1934.

signment to fit their interest. Most students write the assigned interior monologue, but some prefer poems, dialogue poems, or letters. This, too, is a vital part of an anti-tracking pedagogy: students need sufficient freedom to enter an assignment at a point of their choosing; they must be able to reconstruct the task according to their interests and abilities.

For example, after one set of improvisations, "Diane," a young woman with a low track academic history, wrote a dialogue poem about childbirth. The paired perspectives are from the wife of a white plantation owner and an enslaved African American woman. It reads in part:

My man is not here to hold my hand.
My man is not here to hold my hand.

He's out in the field.
He's out in the field.

with a whip in his hand.
with a whip at his back.

I lay here on my feather bed.
I lay here on the blanketed floor.

The pain comes. I push.
The pain comes. I push.

Someone, please come and help.
Someone, please come and help.

The midwife comes, the doctor, too.
The midwife comes, no doctor.

Silk sheets in my mouth.
A wood stick in my mouth.

To halt the screams.
To halt the screams.

I push some more.
I push some more.

I sigh relief. The child is born.
I sigh relief. The child is born.

Strong lungs scream.
Silence.

It squirms there, full of life.
It lies there, cold and blue.

It is a boy.
It was a boy.

Another born to be big and strong.
Another one born to be laid in the ground.

A babe suckling at my breast.
This babe lying in my arms.

Tomorrow I will plan a party.
Tomorrow I will go to the field. ...

None of the improves had been about childbirth, but this was where Diane found her passion.

There are no wrong answers here. Virtually every interior monologue or poem is plausible, even if students approach the same character's thoughts in very different ways. Chaunetta writes from the point of view of a woman whose children are sold off, Eric from that of a man contemplating escape, Monica from that of a plantation owner reflecting on his dissatisfaction with his overseers. Some of the pieces, like Diane's, are publishable, some not.

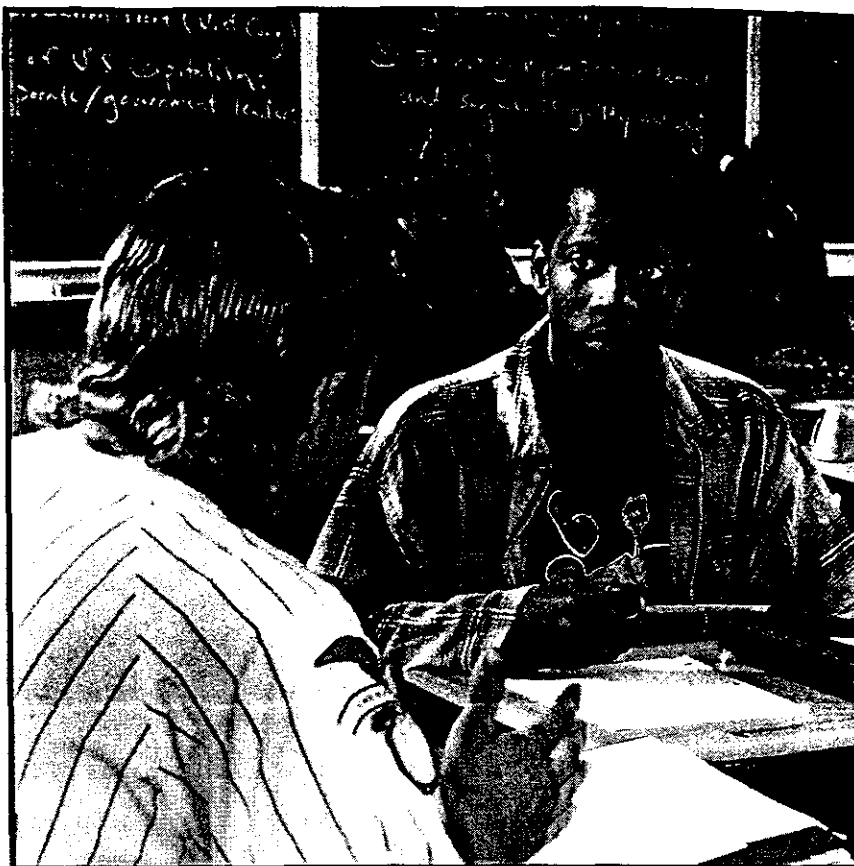
close. But each student gains an insight with validity, and together their portraits form an emotional and empathic patchwork quilt. And again, the assignment challenges all students, regardless of supposed skill levels.

Untracking the Big Questions

Before students begin the read-around I ask them to take notes on three questions: 1) In what ways were people hurt by slavery? 2) How did people resist slavery? and 3) Explain why you think slavery could or could not have ended without a violent struggle. We circle-up for the read-around. I encourage, but don't require, everyone in class to share his or her writing. As students read their pieces they compliment each other, offer "aha's," and take notes on the questions. This is not an editing session, so critical remarks aren't allowed — thus students know they'll only hear positive comments if they choose to share. The read-around, or sharing circle, builds community as youngsters applaud each other's efforts and insights. The medium is the message: we all count here.

Afterward, people look over their notes and write on the questions. Unlike textbook questions, these encourage students to make meaning themselves, not to parrot back the meaning decided by some publishing company. The third question is a difficult one, calling for students to reflect on the obstacles to social change. It's a question that ordinarily might be set aside for the "advanced" class, but because of an anti-tracking pedagogy it can be approached by everyone: they all watched the improves, they all participated, they heard my mini-lectures, they discussed their questions and insights, they climbed inside someone's head to write from his or her point of view and they listened to the "collective text" created by the entire class.

Wrestling with a question like this is simply the next step. Everyone can succeed, and everyone is intellectually challenged. And because theory is grounded in students' in-class experience, the assignment doesn't privilege those students who may be more prac-



Students discuss a role play in Bill Bigelow's class

ticed at abstract thinking.

If we want our classes to be accessible to students regardless of academic background and confidence we have to discover ways of bringing concepts alive. Simulations are another show-don't-tell strategy. For example, in exploring the history of work in the United States, particularly "scientific management" or "Taylorization" — owners studying and then chopping up the labor process into component parts and assigning workers one repetitive task — a simple lecture would reach some students. But using paper airplanes and students as skilled workers to simulate changes in the production process provides all students access to a vital piece of history that can help them reflect on their own work lives.

We can tape off the floor and offer pieces of chocolate to simulate land and wealth distribution in different societies; unsharpened and sharpened pencils can represent raw materials and manufactured products to help us show the dynamics of colonialism; and with balls of cotton, shirts, wheat, "guns," and

bank notes, we can walk students through pre-Civil War sectional conflicts. An untracked classroom can be both more playful and more rigorous than a traditional read-this/listen-to-this/write-this approach.

We can also allow kids to get out of the classroom and into the community, both as social investigators and change-makers. Students can visit a senior citizens' center to interview people about a particular time period. They might tour a factory to learn about working conditions, or travel to a Native American community to meet and talk with activists. Often, I conclude a major unit or a semester by encouraging students to become "truth-tellers" — to take their knowledge about an issue beyond the classroom walls. One year, a student of Linda's and mine choreographed and performed for a number of classes a dance on the life of Ben Linder, the Portlander murdered by the Contras in Nicaragua. Numbers of students re-write children's books from a multicultural standpoint and use them to lead discussions at elementary

JAMES WHITNEY

schools. One group produced a videotape, cablecast city-wide, about the erosion of Native American fishing rights on the Columbia River. One year, a student in a global studies class wrote and recorded "The South Africa Rap," questioning why corporations leave communities in the United States and invest in apartheid; it was subsequently played by several community radio stations around the country. A real-world curriculum aims to give students an equal opportunity to understand society — and to change it.

A New Teacher-Student Covenant

An anti-tracking pedagogy needs to offer alternatives to traditional teaching methods and critique these methods as well. The traditional teacher-student covenant proposes to rehearse students for alienation: I give you an assignment over which you have no or little control. It's not about you, it's about subject x. I think it up — or, more often, a textbook company thinks it up — I design it, you perform it, and I evaluate it. In exchange for successfully carrying out your part of the bargain I give you a reward: your grade. Neither the work nor the grade has any intrinsic value, but the grade has exchange value that can be banked and spent later for desired ends. Conception and execution are separate, and this dichotomy prepares young people for a life of essential powerlessness over the conditions of their labor and the purposes towards which that labor is used. An anti-tracking pedagogy needs to offer a new covenant, one that promises students an education rooted in their lives, with much greater initiative and participation.

In Linda Christensen's and my Literature and History course we constantly draw on students' lives as a way of illuminating both history and literature, and in turn draw on the history and literature as a way of illuminating students' lives. In the slavery and slave resistance unit, mentioned above, we read an excerpt from Frederick Douglass' autobiography in which a teenage Douglass defies and physically con-

fronts his overseer (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, pp. 68-75.) We discuss the conditions in Douglass' life that propelled him into this confrontation, and growing out of the discussion ask students to write about a time in their lives when they stood up for what was right. The assignment gives a framework for students' writing but offers them lots of room to move, and as with the other assignments described, this one adjusts to a student's skill level. Some students may be able to write a personally probing, metaphorical piece while others may struggle to write a couple paragraphs — but the assignment offers all students a point of entry.

The read-around celebrates the diversity of students' experience, and in some cases their bravery or self-sacrifice: Nate writes about confronting a racist and abusive police officer, Stephanie about attending an anti-nuclear power demonstration, Josh about challenging a teacher's unfairness, Zeneda about interrupting an incident of sexual harassment. But the stories also give us the raw material to reflect on when and why people resist, and the relative effectiveness of some forms of resistance over others. And we can test our findings against Frederick Douglass' experiences.

In a unit on the history and sociology of schooling, students write about an encounter with inequality in education, and at a different point, about a positive learning experience. In a lesson on the Cherokee Indian Removal, they write about a time their rights were violated. After reading a Studs Terkel interview with C.P. Ellis, who quit his leadership position in the Klan and became a civil rights advocate and union organizer, students write about a significant change they made in their lives.

The personal writing and sharing undercuts a curriculum designed to inure students to alienated work, as the assignment also equalizes students' opportunity for academic success and theoretical insight. Moreover, it is a key part of creating a classroom discourse that in both form and content tells each student: you matter; your life and learning are important here. That's another

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aim of breaking from a curriculum that is traditionally male dominated, and extols the lives of elites over working people and people of color. Unless we reorient the content of the curriculum to better reflect the lives of all our students, we implicitly tell young people, "Some of you are better than others, some of you are destined for bigger things."

An Explicit Critique of Tracking

Ultimately, an anti-tracking pedagogy needs to engage students in an explicit critique of tracking. As Jeannie Oakes and others have shown, one of the by-products of tracking, even one of its aims, is that low-tracked students blame themselves for their subordinate position in the scholastic hierarchy; students come to believe that they are defective and the system is OK. Consequently, the unequal system of education, of which tracking is an important part, needs a critical classroom examination so that students can expose and expel the voices of self-blame and can overcome whatever doubts they have about their capacity for academic achievement. (Also see Role Play on Tracking, p. 117.)

In our unit on the history and sociology of schooling, students look criti-

cally at their own educations. We start with today and work backwards in time to understand the origins of the structures that now seem as natural as the seasons. From David Storey's novel, *Radcliffe*, we read a short excerpt that poignantly describes the unequal treatment received by students of different class backgrounds and, as mentioned earlier, ask students to recall an episode of unequal schooling from their own lives. We use the novel excerpt and students' stories to talk about the hidden curricula embedded in school practices — the lessons students absorb about democracy, hierarchy, power, solidarity, race, social class, resistance, etc. Students make observations on their own educational experiences, both past and present, and informally inventory the building's resources: who gets what kinds of equipment, facilities, class sizes and why? Our students' research is subversive in the best sense of the term as they engage in a critical inquiry that subverts the apparent legitimacy of a system of privilege that benefits some at the expense of others.

We read excerpts of Jean Anyon's 1980 *Journal of Education* article, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work," which attempts to demonstrate that schools' expectations of students vary depending on the social position of students' parents. For example, through her research Anyon found that schools in working class communities value rote behavior and following directions; "affluent professional schools" value creativity and student initiative. The article, written for an academic journal, is a real stretch for a lot of students and might stay beyond their reach if we confined our conceptual exploration to reading and discussion. Instead, we test Anyon's theory by traveling to a wealthier, suburban school to make observations on classroom and school dynamics. We return to compare these to their observations of our own Jefferson High, a school in the center of a predominantly African American, working class community. Their first-hand experience makes theory student-friendly, and allows everyone to participate in the discussion as we evaluate Anyon's argument.

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We read excerpts from the second chapter of Jeannie Oakes' *Keeping Track* on the history of tracking and a chapter on the history of the SAT test, "The Cult of Mental Measurement," from David Owens' *None of the Above*. From Paul Chapman's *Schools as Sorters*, we review a 1920 survey (p. 126) conducted by Stanford University that found high school students had aspirations that were too high for the jobs available: over 60% of them wanted professional careers, whereas fewer than 5% of jobs were in the professions. Concluded Stanford psychologist William V. Proctor: "For [students'] own best good and the best good of the nation a great many of them should be directed toward the agricultural, mechanical, and industrial fields." Could the "problem" of students' high expectations help explain some social groups' commitment to intelligence testing and tracking? My students react with some anger at this conscious attempt to deflate children's dreams.

Providing new information and ways to question the character of schooling is a vital component of untracking any school or classroom. As I've suggested, tracking is not just a bad idea, but is a practice linked to the legitimization and maintenance of deep social inequality. Undercutting the legitimacy of unfair privilege is thus another necessary piece in an anti-tracking strategy. As indicated in the classroom examples provided, the curriculum can offer students permission and encouragement to critique social inequities and to think about alternatives. Further, introducing into the classroom

a legacy of resistance to injustice helps nurture an ethos of hope and possibility. Learning from individuals and movements working for democratic social change, both past and present, provides inspiration that not only can societies change for the better, but so can we. Because tracking rests on a premise that people's intellectual capabilities and potential for achievement are fixed, an anti-tracking curriculum needs to demonstrate a more hopeful — and realistic — view of human possibility.

Grades and Equity

At the end of the first quarter Linda and I taught together, Alphonso came to complain about his grade. "I don't think I deserve a C," he argued. "Maybe I can't write as well as Katy. But she came in writing like that, and I've worked really hard. Compare what I'm doing now to what I wrote when the year began. I think I deserve at least a B." Alphonso's complaint illustrates a dilemma of evaluating or, more precisely, grading students in an untracked class. Alphonso was right: Katy knew more history, wrote with more detail and clarity, and had a firmer grasp of course concepts. But Alphonso had worked hard, made important strides in his writing and comprehension, and regularly shared his insights with the class. Still, were we to grade on a curve or based on some fixed standard of achievement, a C would have been fair, even generous. However, we had told the class we wouldn't grade this way, but that their grades would be based on effort, openness, growth, consistency of written and oral participation, respect for one another, as well as clarity of analysis. Thus we gladly changed Alphonso's grade and confessed our mistake.

"Fair grading" is an oxymoron and I'd prefer not to give letter grades at all. I attended an ungraded college, Antioch, where professors wrote students end of the term letters indicating academic strengths and areas needing work. Students responded with self-evaluations that commented on teachers' assessments. It all seemed to make



SUSAN LINA RUGGLES

An untracked class needs an egalitarian grading system.

more sense. Of course, Antioch professors didn't see 150 students a day. Nor were they ordered by school or state authorities to sum up a student's performance with a single letter grade.

An anti-tracking pedagogy needs a system of student evaluation that does not reward students based primarily on the knowledge with which they begin a class. A system of fixed criteria from the outset benefits some and penalizes others largely on the basis of class, race, gender or nationality. An untracked class needs an egalitarian evaluation system that lets all students know they can succeed based on what they do in class, not on what they have or have not accomplished in the past.

Linda and I do not assign letter grades on individual assignments during the term. Instead, we write comments on students' papers indicating our evaluation and keep track of in-class participation and completion of written work. Students maintain folders of their work and at the end of each term write extensive self-evaluations analyzing all aspects of their achievement in class and present a case for a

particular letter grade. Linda and I read their evaluations, review their folders, discuss their overall progress and conference with students. Only then do we assign letter grades.

As in Alphonso's case, sometimes we blow it. But students are always free to challenge us, call our criteria into question and draw our attention to factors we may have overlooked. Every year we tell students about Alphonso to underscore our fallibility and to encourage their vigilance.

Ours is obviously not the only way to grade. But whatever system teachers adopt should derive from a broader anti-tracking philosophy and strategy. In evaluation, as with everything else, we must be bound by considerations of equity, not tradition or efficiency.

An Anti-tracking Pedagogy

An anti-tracking pedagogy is more than just a collection of good teaching ideas strung together in a classroom with kids of different social backgrounds and educational histories. That may be a step in the right direction, but

we still need to ask: towards what? Is it enough to offer quality education in a heterogeneous setting, as some untracking proponents suggest? I don't think so. Once out of school, our students will still be "tracked" by jobs that require little decision-making and initiative, by high unemployment, by racism and sexism. We can't truly untrack schools without untracking society. Thus an anti-tracking pedagogy should equip educators and students to recognize and combat all inequity. Its organizing principle should be justice — in the classroom, in school, and in society at large. □

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Some of the anti-tracking lessons mentioned here, and others, are described in greater detail in his curricula *Strangers in Their Own Country* (South Africa), *The Power in Our Hands* (U.S. labor history), and *Inside the Volcano* (U.S. foreign policy in Central America), available from NECA, PO Box 73038, Washington, D.C. 20056. Write for NECA's free "Teaching for Change" catalog.

99