

# Chili Pepper Pedagogy

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**C**ONFESS: the first thing you want to find out at RateMyProfessors.com is whether or not you got a chili pepper—that is, whether or not you’re considered “hot.” If you did get one, you will immediately convey that fact to others, with the proper mixture of incredulity and irony. If you didn’t get one, you will privately remind yourself of the way that teaching evaluations are, after all, a mere popularity contest based on the most superficial criteria. And perhaps the chili pepper is indeed one of these, according to Amy Baylor, a professor of Instructional Systems at Florida State University. She has designed digitized “pedagogical agents” ranging from dorky to hot and invited students to choose. The top choices are strong-jawed men with muscular builds, and women with long hair and prominent breasts, regardless of any other factors. In Baylor’s opinion, the students “almost always don’t pick the best one for them” (Lagorio 38), though I suppose that depends on what “best” we’re talking about. But here I’d like to consider the chili pepper as gesturing, at least, toward something less superficial than titties and bums. That something has been called an “erotics of instruction.” As with any erotics, there is a wide range in the ways this term is interpreted and put into practice.

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Teaching, of course, works much like seduction: we want our students to want something they didn't know they wanted. Etymologically, seduction is a matter of leading someone to one side of the path they habitually follow: seductive teachers may pretend to tread that path for a while ("beginning where the student is at") but ultimately they want their students to go somewhere else. How can this be done? Logic, careful explanation—these help but by themselves are not enough to incite change; things need to be proved upon our pulses. And in the classroom, as elsewhere, the pulse quickens by a kind of contagion, picking up on another person's energy. Indeed, the transfer of energy may be the most lasting aspect of what goes on in the classroom. Your students are likely to forget almost all the information you give them as soon as the exam is over. What they will remember, with any luck, is your particular way of approaching the subject, and your passion for it. That these are "yours" means that it is ultimately *you* who becomes unforgettable, like Mr. Chips or Miss Jean Brodie. And this presents certain pitfalls for all concerned.

I'm not talking about the usual pitfall of eroticized instruction: when a sexual relationship is carried on concurrently with the teaching relationship, it is a clear breach of professional ethics. No, I'm referring to subtler temptations, not the least of which is the desire to be adored. A teacher's passion and energy may be part of a performance that, like any performance, is aimed at getting applause. And it likely will get that applause in the form of high evaluations, in an age where the classroom is in competition with television. Admittedly the energy that galvanizes a classroom is partly a matter of performance, even physical performance: the teacher's body can also be a pedagogical tool. In the interests of making my point I have swaggered, galumphed, fallen flat on the floor, and done brief modern dances. Of course my real point may well have been that I *could* do those things and that doing those things would help make me memorable. There is a sense, though, in which the more my energies (of whatever kind) expand, the more those of my students contract into an appreciative but ultimately passive spectatorship. Thus teachers in this mode, admired and admirable, may actually be doing a perverse disservice to their students, as John Glavin has pointed out: "The more effective the teacher, the more likely he—or she—is to make the student bear false witness: the more engaging, the more memorable, the more lastingly impressive the teacher, the more profoundly perjured the student" (14).

We all know of graduate students whose admiration has led to imitation, and little more: having worked in their mentor's area and in their

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has been the recipient of the Mount St. Vincent Alumnae Award for Teaching Excellence; he does not, however, have a chili pepper.

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mentor's manner, they are then unable to generate their own original contributions.

Another version of this problem is the nurturing model of teaching that is becoming increasingly common. This model holds that a good teacher is one who really *cares* about the students, will go the extra mile for them and is unfailingly nice. Sounds good, but this too has its pitfalls. In fact I would go so far as to argue the opposite: we should not care about our students. Treat them politely and responsibly, sure, but don't *care* about them, for that emotional bond implicitly invites and expects a reciprocal caring from our students. It is a less flamboyant version of the need to be adored. When I took up my first teaching job, it took me only a few weeks to shed my idealism and realize that I wasn't really doing this job for my students, many of whom couldn't have cared less for my caring. What has kept me going all these years, then? Two things: my passion for the subject and my fascination with teaching itself, which is something quite different from a fascination with those who are taught. The subject, our subject as teachers of literature, is surely one of the slipperiest imaginable: a Gordian knot of complexly intertwined elements, with no sword in sight but the sword of Damocles that always hangs over our heads: the possibility that we might be getting it wrong. Hence, its fearsome fascination. Equally fearsome, and equally fascinating, is the process of teaching this kind of subject in a classroom that will always have its own complex chemistry, changing with each new work and almost with each new day. It is a bit like hosting an eight-month-long dinner party where the dishes are the works assigned and the conversation is "class discussion." I am of course thinking both of what Judy Chicago made of the dinner party and of what Mrs Ramsay makes of it in *To the Lighthouse*. As in Woolf's novel, there are moments in the classroom that partake of eternity, luminous moments of connection. We strive for such moments—rare, to be sure—and that daily strife has an interest of its own as we continually balance and adjust, struggling for the right blend of clarity and complexity, hoping for those moments when the class ignites. Neither the charisma of the teacher nor our care for the taught is then the source of our passion, but the sheer process of teaching—and of learning, which is always part of the best teaching. In the classroom's space of coming-to-be there is a charge that is in the deepest sense erotic.

The kind of eroticism I'm talking about is described at the end of *Eros the Bittersweet*, where Ann Carson makes an unexpected shift. She has been talking about Eros as the charged space between the lover and the beloved and the ways in which we can have knowledge of it. Now she

speaks of knowledge itself as such a space between and, consequently, as erotically charged:

A thinking mind ... reaches out to grasp something related to itself and to its present knowledge (and so knowable in some degree) but also separate from itself and from its present knowledge (not identical with these). In any act of thinking the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to another but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space....When the mind reaches out to know, the space of desire opens. (171)

Whether this version of desire will “get a chili pepper” is perhaps not so important as all that. Beyond any ratings on any kind of scale, this desire is what keeps us going, what keeps us erotically fixated on something we can never fully attain.

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