

Punk Power in the First-Year Writing Classroom

> Optimism One

This essay frames the connections between punk principles and writing theory in order to re-form what the author emphasizes in his own composition classroom, in particular the do-it-yourself ethic, a sense of passion and fearlessness, the agency to attack institutions, and the seeking of pleasure.

Throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked—not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

As a fan of punk rock music and as a participant-observer in and of punk rock culture, I have long been interested in how I might be able to incorporate the principles of punk ideology in a writing class. That is, how could I bring the energy, independence, and attitude of this counterculture to bear on new and timid writers, particularly first-year composition students?

My reasons for this marriage range from the personal to the practical, and sometimes to the political. I was a punk rocker when I was in college. I remember having a feeling that even as I was often marginalized by my peers for my looks, viewpoints, and choice of music, I was also somehow empowered, not by happy coincidence but because of the training in living against the grain that punk culture engenders. I felt that I could question authority and effect change, that, in fact, I was an authority and my voice was as valid as anyone else's voice. This was not only inspiring in general but it also affected my performance in school. I was engaged, committed, and critical in my studies, which most of my instructors appreciated and welcomed. Therefore, as a writing teacher, my hope is not necessarily that my students will listen to the Dead Kennedys and slam dance their way to a revolutionary consciousness, but that they can use the central tenets of punk to inform their practice and enjoyment of writing. That is, "I don't mean to romanticize punk, but rather to heuristicize it, to trace what I feel is its most useful, essential thread" (Sirc 18).

Of course, empowerment is a complicated term. Webster's dictionary defines *empower* as "to give official authority or legal power to." But according to

some it is not that easy, especially in the classroom. Those in cultural studies are quick to point out how dubious and perhaps deceiving the idea of student-centered classrooms can be. Candace Spigelman claims that teachers will always ultimately hold power because they usually design the class and determine grades; she suggests that the overt desire to empower is often a covert attempt to control; and she also adds that many students fear the agency that empowerment invokes and will recoil at the required responsibility and exposure (28). I could increase this list ad nauseam.

But I do not think I am trying to fool students here. As a teacher, I do not intend to impose any sort of regimented agenda. And when I was a student myself, I never thought I was somehow completely free from the dictates of authority in education. I knew I was being judged for my performances, and that those judgments affected my superficial worth as a student, as with my GPA. But as a student, in feeling a sense of empowerment, I had some wiggle room with how I could express myself. It was not that I became the all-powerful God of the classes I took, but that I *believed* that I *shared* enough power to be able to write the way I wanted or needed to, which was crucial in determining whether I wanted to write at all. Without that inspiration, then, without the invitation to engage as an *authority*, I would have likely been rendered silent by the passive anonymity inherent in traditional student-teacher relations.

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The bottom line for me here is that I want my students to feel that they have something important to say, and that they are being heard. I want to encourage and enable. Ideally, yes, I want them to write critically and with conviction; I want them to feel free to challenge formulaic standards of writing. But if such a demand is too intimidating and therefore repellent, I want to at least imbue in my students the belief in their validity as authors, that I will afford them the respect I would give anyone else who has shown a thoughtful effort in putting words together on paper. And, for me, doing so is made easier by looking at these ideas of empowerment and writing through punk lenses.

In order to coherently frame this essay, then, I am using Seth Kahn-Egan's "principles of 'punk'":

1. The Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethic, which demands that we do our own work because anybody who would do our work for us is only trying to jerk us around;
2. A sense of anger and passion that finally drives a writer to say what's really on his or her mind;
3. A sense of destructiveness that calls for attacking institutions when those institutions are oppressive, or even dislikable;
4. A willingness to endure or even pursue pain to make oneself heard or noticed;

5. A pursuit of the “pleasure principle,” a reveling in some kind of Nietzschean chasm (100).

These principles not only give structure to what I think are punk’s most pragmatic qualities, but they also fit quite well with the many common traits and practices of good writing that composition studies promotes. Therefore, these points of punkness can provide yet another way into helping students improve both their ability and their belief in writing.

Do It Yourself

One of the most important facets of punk ideology is the DIY ethic, of which there are many components. This ethic implies self-reliance—that it is possible for you to do whatever you want, however you want to do it. But this is not necessarily a solitary or class-restricted act. It can definitely include other like-minded indi-

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viduals. The key here is an independence from the controlled constructions imposed by institutions and corporations, as well as from standards of creativity that might not be conducive to what you want to produce. In fact, the sense of commu-

nity within the punk world is a source both of support and of creative tension, as the networking in this underground culture provides the often-needed guidance in putting out one’s own music, as is evidenced in a Web site called *Book Your Own Fuckin’ Life!*, a collection of resources for punk bands that includes contact information for record labels, distributors, promoters, venues, radio stations, fanzines, and record stores around the world.

The connection between DIY and the writing class is that students, to more ably steer their own educations, must be committed to passionately engaging not only with their schoolwork but with their peers as well. This means that students must accept and I dare say embrace the responsibility for what they want to learn and write, which results in comments like that of Guillermo, one of my students writing a response to Donnell Alexander’s “Cool like Me.” In defiance of Alexander’s claim that African Americans have virtually sole claim on the word “cool,” Guillermo writes, in an essay titled “We Are All Cool,” “From now on, I should probably use the word *tight* instead of *cool*, but I am not going to let a simple essay change the way I talk.” This reflects the notion that students must “move from being passive consumers of ideology to active participants in their cultures” (Kahn-Egan 100). They must be resourceful. They must push the boundaries of what they think they know and can do. They must collaborate, not just because they have been implored by their teacher to get into groups, but because they understand and believe in the power of collective interaction.

Peter Elbow outlines this sort of activity in *Writing without Teachers*, in which he discusses both the independence and the interdependence that are possible for and available to writers. He provides practical ways for students to overcome the

fear, dislike, and avoidance of writing that standard post-grammar-school education seems to nurture, and to reinvest in the joy of creativity and the concomitant desire to write with which kids are born (xii). This requires a self-trust that will open students to the recognition that they already have the almost universally accessible tools necessary for being a writer. Tangibly, I am talking about something to write with and something to write on, as well as a community of peers; intangibly, I am referring to life experience and imagination.

Elbow suggests that students freewrite to both increase fluency and generate ideas. He also promotes drafting, or “the developmental model of the writing process, [whereby] you might well try to write it four times, not once, and try to help the piece evolve through these four versions” (19). And he delineates a number of interactively conflicting ideas that writers should keep in mind when examining their work and trying to coax along this progress.

Of course, the writing process can be greatly improved if students have a group of peers with whom they can share their writing. Otherwise it is quite possible to feel unaccountable for practicing, not to mention being stifled in various stages. But there is a simple solution. Elbow says, “If you are stuck writing or trying to figure something out, there is nothing better than finding one person, or more, to talk to. If they don’t agree or have trouble understanding, so much the better—so long as their minds are not closed” (49). This is the basis of knowledge making that composition theorists exalt. Group work not only privileges student-centered, democratic practices, but it highlights the interactive nature of creativity. So rather than the potential inertness that comes from writing in isolation, then, “[W]e want to empower our students, often by way of collaborative, community-fostering activities” (Spigelman 27).

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What I want to stress here is that all of these practices can be done “alone” and relatively free from economic limitations. No teacher-authority is needed, no grammar book is necessary, and no institution is required. Just like punks who form their own bands, write and produce their own music, and put on their own shows, so too can students form their own groups and work together to improve their writing. Of course, if they want to take it further, they can organize their own readings and self-publish. And what punk culture teaches us, in fact one of its most valuable lessons, is that the importance of creativity and doing it yourself is not about producing a perfect, easily consumable package for profit. It is about content and heart.

Anger and Passion

Emotion is the core of punk. It derives from a place of honesty and frustration that refuses to hide the feelings that are so much a part of being human. And while the

etiquette of popular culture encourages composure and the dulling if not burying of what is really felt unless it is pleasant or sentimental, punks choose to let it *all* come out, whether pretty or profane. Safety is not an issue; it is not even considered. Rather, punk culture celebrates the liberating and therefore empowering effects of unbridled passion, as indicated in the song "Scream" by Black Flag:

I might be a big baby
But I'll scream in your ear
'Til I find out
Just what it is I'm doing here. (1)

It is this search for personal truth that fuels such naked exhibition. Punks do not care about how they are perceived by the easily offended, those trained to maintain reserve and respect. Instead, they express themselves freely "in terms that main-

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stream audiences would blanch at" (Kahn-Egan 101). So whether it is the venomous spit of rebellious fury or the gut-wrenching soul-cry of desire, punks do not hold back.

In the writing classroom, though, students are often expected to conform to less risky subject matter. Even if "the personal" is welcomed, there are usually still limitations on not only *what* students share but also *how* they choose to share it. Whether explicitly or not, they hear a message that says, "Above all do not be simple, direct, nor immediate" (Anzaldúa 167). If nothing else, the controlling nature of academia has quite possibly stomped out the emotional enthusiasm with which students initially enter school. And if the brave and passionate student chooses to break free of such codified mores, he or she will likely be discouraged, if not roundly criticized and diminishingly graded. In contrast, "[r]eading against the grain can help us step outside our own aesthetic and appreciate papers which assume different and more direct conventions for emotional expression" (Newkirk 36).

The call for student writers to find and use their authentic voices should not be tempered or qualified. It should be an open and honest invitation. Indeed, "[t]he participatory classroom is a 'free speech' classroom in the best sense, because it invites all expressions from all the students. An empowering class thrives on a lively exchange of thoughts and feelings" (Shor 22). It is crucial that students hear a consistent, unrestricted message. Trust between teachers and students as well as among peers is essential if writers are asked to share sensitive material. After all, "the underlying ideal of the course is that students both can and must speak out when they have something to say" (Kahn-Egan 102). And when those voices turn into bitter bile, it is important to remember the silence and passivity that can undermine a writing course.

A great example of a student who took my invitations to heart was Jenny. In writing about Charles M. Young's "Losing: An American Tradition," in which the author makes several dubious comments about gender identity, value, and association, Jenny writes,

The final straw with Young was his reference to the word *pussy*. Tactful and mature, Young insists that [being called a] pussy is the ultimate insult. He says, "Men are concerned that they'll be called not just a female, but female genitalia" (429). Technically, if someone were to call someone a word for female genitalia, they would be calling them a *vagina*. Pussy is a slang word, not the actual word for female parts. Try walking up to a girl and calling it that, [and then] see how far it takes you. It would be like when someone is called an *asshole*. They are not referring to them as the actual portal from which feces exits. They are just using slang. So I guess this might make me a *dick*, but Young can kiss my female ass.

My response? In part I said, "This is perhaps the best reading response I have ever read. I love your attitude, which you back up with some real smarts." I was not about to question her use of what many deem as vulgar terms for fear of stifling her voice, the quality that so many composition instructors overtly champion but secretly fear.

For the punk-friendly teacher, it is actually a comfort to know that "when-ever we address in the classroom subjects that students are passionate about there is always the possibility of confrontation, forceful expression of ideas, or even conflict" (hooks 39). And as extreme and demanding and blunt as she may sound, the imperative tone of Gloria Anzaldúa is the perfect complement to the punk attitude. She says, as if screaming, "*Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on paper*" (173; italics hers).

Attack and Destroy

The intensity of punk passion is rarely born in a vacuum. It is not just the practice of emoting for the sake of its cathartic value; nor is it the shallow rebellion so often portrayed by popular media. Rather, for the most part, it is the direct, intentional, and, yes, considerate positioning of subjectivity whereby the individual makes clear where he or she stands, particularly in personal and political matters. In this regard nothing is sacred: the church and the state, capitalism, racial and sexual identities—you name it. If there is a feeling of repulsion or oppression, I guarantee there is a punk song about it. And as if the process of writing and singing about issues is not worthy enough in itself,

... punk discourse moves beyond criticism. Punk interrogates and deconstructs texts/symbols/icons/cultures much like academic discourses do. However, punk also goes beyond that. The punk writer typically provides alternatives to the problems identified in the writing. (Kahn-Egan 101)

It is not simply the expression of a nihilistic tendency, then, for a band like Millions of Dead Cops to write a song called "Corporate Deathburger," in which they question and attack the consequences of fast-food restaurants' practices. Rather it is the advocating of a very personal and a very political position; it is the affirmation of both community and self, even if both are on the margins of society. And whereas popular culture condones if not promotes acquiescent consumption, punk culture

demands confrontation and eradication, when necessary, through which more than just a *sense* of agency is available but where *actual* agency is achieved. That is, the activities of expression and engagement create a heightened self-awareness unavailable through passive existence.

The implications for the writing classroom are numerous, as “no education is politically neutral” (hooks 37). And while I am inclined to delve into a rant about my own institutional foes, I think it is more useful to explore the transformative

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possibilities in the critical analysis of conventional academic discourse. In particular, “we can use punk discourse to cast criticism in a language that’s at least less alien . . . than more traditional languages of the academy” (Kahn-Egan 104). Instead of stifling student thought with ven-

triloquistic customs, then, students can make more natural discursive choices. As Ira Shor points out, “The way students speak, feel, and think about any subject is the starting point for a critical study of themselves, their society, and their academic subjects” (22). It is possible that this alternative rhetoric might fit into the increasingly accepted genre of creative nonfiction. Ideally, “the format of their original punk texts will be open—they can write songs, articles, letters, whatever” (Kahn-Egan 103). At the very least, teachers who profess a desire to facilitate students’ critical engagement should think about how they can present or co-create writing assignments that invite diverse discourses, whether those discourses are overtly political or not (Bridwell-Bowles 349). Last semester, for their research papers, my students wrote segmented photo essays that not only required them to consider visual rhetoric but also included ethnographic fieldwork as well as traditional scholarly sources. The result was that my students were intimately involved in their projects while still fulfilling the academic requirements of first-year composition. And I dare say they liked it.

Fearless Suffering

The danger of upsetting conventional paradigms is always present in punk. And with that danger comes the possibility of encountering painful realities, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. But punks do not balk at their fears; rather, they kiss them on the mouth. That is, whether stage-diving into a crowd, confronting institutional oppression, or examining personal trauma, they take action even when the consequences might hurt. Punks are the protestors, the hippies, the outlaws. They are spit on and reviled but still they persist. They are bullied and beaten yet they persevere. In “Reclamation,” Fugazi illuminates punk culture’s response to such massive and brutal opposition:

These are our demands:
We want control of our bodies.

Decisions will now be ours.
You carry out your noble actions,
we will carry our noble scars . . .
No one here is asking
but there is a question of trust.
You will do what looks good to you on paper,
we will do what we must. (2)

Because they are members on the margins of society, it is helpful to parallel punks with other groups on the outside of mainstream society, such as feminist women of color. And yes, as cultural pariahs negated on several levels, it is a bold and risky maneuver to define and demand, to ask questions that popular culture does not think are worthy of asking or answering. Yet, "it is here . . . in this extreme coincidence of my status as someone twice stigmatized . . . that I stand in a struggle against demoralization and suicide and toward self-love and self-determination" (Jordan 174). It is no wonder that punks say what no one wants to say for fear of the recriminations of laughter, scorn, and violence. Their impetus for proactivity is not only day-to-day survival but also a claim to simple personhood, agency, that what they think and feel is real and meaningful.

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In the academy, students often have similar minority status. Their voices are muffled by canonical texts they are forced to ingest and regurgitate. But there is a revolutionary alternative in the writer who insists that his or her teacher validate the personal, not to mention the instructor who invites it. Of course, with both comes pain. In the first, the historical precedent of the dominant modes is a formidable barrier that the gatekeepers love to uphold. With the second, self-examination can be a murky and traumatic endeavor. That is, "[w]riting is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power" (Anzaldúa 171). With this in mind, it is my belief that even as personal writing is risky, it yields greater rewards than does traditional academic writing. Indeed, "[a]cademic language often actually alienates human beings from their own emotions and experiences" (Daniell 240). And I would argue that as personal writing connects the self to society, academic writing often erases the self.

It is the productive side of pedagogy that I want to promote. I am not saying that students should be required to face their demons, but I want them to trust that they can do it without being criticized. Ideally, I want my students to share "a deeply held belief in the power of language to heal and to bring about and deepen spiritual experience" (Daniell 241). For a student to articulate his or her subject position is a scary act. But the growth that is available to such a courageous person

is immeasurable, which is why I choose to welcome if not advocate self-reflection, or self-authorization, even and especially when it is painful. For example, one of my students, Tina, makes a deep connection with Judith Ortiz Cofer's "The Story of My Body," a narrative about how the author is perceived in different cultures. In response, Tina writes,

Her story made me want to cry because she went through what I went through When I was younger, I had not even one thought as to the color of my skin or the hair on my arms, but going to school in a white neighborhood made me feel like I was an outcast My friends would make jokes and tease me every so often, and I would laugh along with them, but really I would be so embarrassed.

By connecting with the author even though the association is traumatic, I would contend, students experience a greater sense of empowerment than they would if they were only providing objective analysis. Also, perhaps, because of their acknowledgment of and journey through difficult matters, students can reach a level of happiness that was previously unavailable to them.

The Pleasure Principle

Punk and pleasure go hand in hand. Unfortunately, this is the least recognized characteristic of this often-maligned culture. But rather than just being the completely angry, the totally destructive, the super serious, punk is equally humorous. It

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thrives on a playfulness that is as uninhibited as it is celebratory. Punks love to poke fun at people, places, and things, especially themselves. And a simple mention of Hellworms' "Rat Brains on Crack" or the Vandals' "Anarchy Burger (Hold the Government)" are a good indication of how silly or ridiculous they

can be, even as they provide critical commentary. And as palpably as I can sense the reader's contempt, this type of reaction only highlights the irreverent attitude of punks, since their gratification in this sense is mainly self-centered.

Students of writing could learn a lot from this self-satisfaction. Instead of worrying themselves to silence about which scholarly writer or literary giant said what and when, as well what their professors and peers are going to think, they can listen to and trust their instincts to write the way they please. There are options beyond the antiseptic language of the academy. For instance, "[One type of] pleasure is rooted in perception more than conception, in the visual more than the intellectual, in looking outward more than inward, in amusement and delight more than in self-improvement" (Newkirk 73). This is an echo of Anzaldúa's metaphorical imploration to "[w]rite with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers" (173). Students need the opportunity to play with language in order to discover its possibilities. Otherwise, they risk becoming the robots that formulaic writing promotes. And I also believe that "linguistic and

rhetorical flexibility may help students to write better conventional prose” (Bridwell-Bowles 351).

There is a chance that students might actually enjoy writing if they can do so without restrictions. The invitation to share their personal quirkiness and their everyday observations, as well as their creativity, is more than validation. It shows students that writing need not be controlled, polite, and tidy. Rather, it can be as messy as life. This is evident in an in-class freewrite that Robert, one of my Summer Bridge students, wrote about Elva Treviño Hart’s *Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child*. He says,

Okay, this girl named Elva and her family are struggling. That’s sad. I think she needs to stop whining about it. It’s probably not that bad. You don’t know struggle until you’re thrown in a camp for three weeks with no free time. Lights out by 10:30, up and ready to go by 6:00. You want pain, Elva? Try playing ping-pong with José and his twisted side-spin serve. THAT is pain.

This is writing that Newkirk might invite, for he describes an assignment in which he asks his students to describe the conversations they hear and says,

[I]t freed many students from writing about serious topics and opened the way to a kind of dailiness, to the pleasure that they took in routine contact with friends, roommates, classmates. They presented a self I had only seen in glimpses before—loud, profane, disrespectful, humorous. (80)


The key here is that students are not limited to one voice, one format. They can include all the colors of their lives, whether inside or outside of the academy. There is no distancing or alienation of self. And I would argue that any amount of empowerment that students attain is contingent upon their total, holistic personal investment.

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This is a lofty rhetoric, I know. It is the punk in me that refuses to qualify every bold statement with the ongoing negation of so much scholarly work. And I would certainly rather spend my time and energy on thinking about what punk writing *can* do than what it *cannot*. My focus is dependent on a reader and a student who will engage in what Elbow calls “the believing game[. . .] the constant practice in getting the mind to see or think what is new, different, alien” (173). It is more helpful to me for students to recognize their constructive ability rather than their constructed subjectivity. As Kahn-Egan says,

The underlying ideal of the course is that students both can and must speak out when they have something to say. Ideally, the seeds of DIY will sprout, and students will take charge of their writing and hence of their lives, discovering that the words they put on a page mean something. (102)

And as utopian as this may sound, I do not think it is unrealistic. It does require flexibility and faith. It demands that writing teachers “must begin with

respect [. . . and] open our minds to the potential of alternative ways of learning, alternative places of learning, alternative ways of reasoning, and even alternative reasons for learning” (Leonhardy 616). Punk provides all of the above. It is multi-faceted and multidimensional. It is critical on a number of levels. And, as evidenced throughout this paper, it weds the personal to the social and the political, through which empowered writers can express their lives—blood, guts, and all. 

Note

All student authors approved the inclusion of their writing in this article, though their names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

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LAURIE GROBMAN WINS TETYC'S BEST ARTICLE AWARD FOR 2004

The winner of TETYC's Best Article of the Year Award is "Thinking Differently about Difference: Multicultural Literature and Service Learning," by Laurie Grobman. The article appeared in the May 2004 issue.

The 2004 Best Article in TETYC Committee members were Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt, Iris Gribble Neal, Alexis Nelson, and Joanna Tardoni. The award, which includes a plaque from the journal office and a cash prize provided by past editor Nell Ann Pickett, was presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication's annual meeting in San Francisco in March.
