



The Impossibility of Teaching Cultural Studies

Gilbert B. Rodman

As my title suggests, I want to argue for a hard truth. You can *not* teach people how to do cultural studies. You. Just. Can't.

To be sure, many of us routinely do things that seem to give the lie to that statement, insofar as we teach courses filled with books and articles that (1) attempt to define cultural studies, (2) make claims about how cultural studies should be practiced, and/or (3) are themselves examples of cultural studies research. I have taught such a seminar myself multiple times over the past 20 years, so I know the genre pretty well.¹ It's taken me a long time to accept the central claim I'm making in this chapter.

But we should be honest with ourselves. At best, the kind of courses I've just described expose students to a range of cultural studies texts and

¹At the University of South Florida, this seminar was officially called "Contemporary Cultural Studies." At the University of Minnesota, its formal name is "Critical Communication Studies." Syllabi for all those courses—as well as compressed, four-week version of the course I taught at the University of Turku in 2015—can be found online at <http://www.gilrodman.com/syllabi>

G. B. Rodman (✉)

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

e-mail: gil@gilrodman.com

maybe—if we're lucky—they inspire some (but by no means all or even necessarily most) of those students to embrace cultural studies as a project they want to take up themselves. But this is not the same thing as teaching those students how to do cultural studies.

In part, my argument hinges on a crucial slippage of meaning in how we typically think about “teaching.” On the one hand, the word describes routine practices of pedagogical labor: for example, crafting syllabi, writing and presenting lectures, leading seminar discussions, grading papers and exams, and so on. All that labor implies the presence of other people (i.e., our students), but none of it guarantees anything about what those people actually get out of our courses. When we say things like, “I’m teaching my cultural studies seminar next semester,” we’re making claims about *our* labor that have no necessary bearing on what corporatized universities have come to describe as “learning outcomes.” In this sense—and this sense only—we can teach cultural studies, insofar as we make something called “cultural studies” the central focus of courses that we offer. But, in the end, this is nothing more than a descriptive—and trivial—claim about the content of our syllabi.

On the other hand, we also use the word “teaching” in ways that are entirely about the impact our pedagogical labor has on students. Ideally, after all, the people who take our courses are not the same at the end of their time with us as they were when it began. In this sense of the term, “teaching” primarily refers to “learning outcomes” (though not in the corporatized sense of that term): it’s a process that changes the people on the other end of it so that they have new knowledge, or new skills, and/or new ways of seeing the world. If students aren’t transformed in some way by the time they’ve spent in our classrooms, then we haven’t taught them anything. In theory, some of those changes are the result of the pedagogical work described the first sense of the word, but the actual relationship between our labor and our students’ transformations is rarely as straightforward as we would like it to be.

Put a slightly different way, the semantic slippage at the core of my argument is the one between “teaching a course” and “teaching our students,” and we need to remember that many of our students, independently of anything we may (or may not) do well on our side of the desk, will not learn anything like what we aim to teach them. More crucially,

the converse is also true: the fact that people learn how to do cultural studies does not necessarily mean that they've been transformed because someone else has taught them all (or even most) of the tricks of the cultural studies trade. What we do in our classrooms undoubtedly matters—especially insofar as our mistakes can make it harder for students to learn anything—but, in the end, what our students actually learn depends more on *their* labor than it does on ours.

To this point, much of what I've described applies to almost any subject that one might teach. But cultural studies isn't a traditional form of academic work (and, arguably, it isn't necessarily academic at all, but that's too big a debate to take on in the space available here) and the ways that it differs from more conventional disciplines make it especially difficult to teach. For the rest of this essay, then, I want to focus on three facets of the problem at hand that are specific to cultural studies: (1) teaching undergraduates, (2) teaching graduate students, and (3) teaching anyone/everyone else.

Teaching Undergraduate Students

As I've argued elsewhere (Rodman 2015, 93–94), there is no such thing as teaching cultural studies to undergraduates—at least not in the US (and maybe not anywhere, but I'll limit my argument here to the national context I know best)—because cultural studies is a *political* project as much as (if not more than) it is an intellectual one. And, in the vast majority of cases, undergraduates don't enter our classrooms prepared to invest in political activity. To be sure, there are individual exceptions to that rule—and thankfully so—but they remain exceptions. Few of us who teach undergraduates in the US have the luxury of being able to assume that our classrooms will be filled with students who are ready to *think* politically, much less to engage in overtly political work.

Readers of this essay who work in US higher education can test this out for yourselves—though you do so at your own risk. Prepare a new undergraduate course with the expectation that most of the students in that course will be (1) politically aware, (2) politically engaged, and (3) politically progressive (because, even though there are somehow people

who still resist this notion, cultural studies really *is* a leftist project [Rodman 2015, 43–49]). Compile a reading list and craft assignments that will only work well if the class as a whole is willing and able to take a left-leaning, activist approach to the subject at hand. If you're reading this book, there's a good chance that you're capable of designing such a course. The odds are also good that you'll enjoy the process and that it's a course you'd be excited to teach.

The odds are even better, though, that you will struggle to make such a course to work in practice—and that's *not* because of any faults you may have as an instructor. There's a fair chance—especially if you need someone else's approval to teach a new course, and doubly so if you're not protected by the magic sword and helmet of tenure—that someone higher up the food chain at your institution (e.g., your department chair, an associate dean) will balk at approving a new course that requires students to engage in overtly political work. More crucially, though, even if you clear that hurdle, there's a good chance that your students won't cooperate. A tiny handful will be as excited as you are by the experiment, a few more might be open to the prospect of becoming more politically engaged, but a significant number of them will simply be unprepared to take on an overtly political project—and there's a genuine risk that a vocal minority will be actively upset and belligerent about what they see as your efforts to impose a political agenda on them.²

To provide a concrete example: one of the undergraduate courses I teach on a semi-regular basis is something I call “Media Outlaws.”³ It's a course about media pranksters, activists, and hackers: “ordinary” people, with no inside connections to mainstream media institutions, who

² If there are major exceptions to this pessimistic vision, they involve the various “identity”-based disciplines—for example, Women's Studies, African American Studies, and so on—that already have political agendas at their core. Even in these departments, though, there is often pressure (both from administrators and from students) for instructors to steer clear of pedagogy that looks like political “indoctrination.” Instructors are encouraged to teach students *about*, for example, feminist activism rather than to teach students *how* to engage in such activism themselves. Similarly, courses that require students merely to read and analyze “minority” literature as aesthetic texts—rather than to take up the pointed challenges that such literature often poses to hegemonic cultural and political norms—don't ruffle administrators' feathers as much as courses that require students to read and produce critical analyses of institutional racism.

³ Syllabi for the different iterations of this course can be found online at <http://www.gilrodman.com/syllabi>

nonetheless manage to use mainstream media against itself for purposes of political critique, resistance, and rebellion. I originally designed the course as an excuse to teach *The Yes Men* (a 2003 documentary made by an activist group of the same name), but it also includes readings on Adbusters, Anonymous, Negativland, and other “culture jammers.” I have the luxury of teaching on a (relatively) progressive campus in a (relatively) progressive metropolitan area in a (relatively) progressive state—so there aren’t a lot of bible-thumpers or entrepreneurial libertarians in my classrooms to begin with who would be resistant (or even antagonistic) to the course’s subject matter. It’s a situation about as tailor-made for left-leaning, politically engaged undergraduate teaching as I can imagine in a US context and yet, routinely, I still get students in the Outlaws class who are surprised—and even shocked—that we’re reading authors who not only think the world isn’t already a happy, egalitarian utopia, but also actually want to *change* the world.

In a different universe, I could teach this course as a four-month-long workshop on grassroots activism, where the bulk of the work that students do builds on and feeds into the various political projects that they were planning (or already engaged in) before they ever enrolled in my class. In practice, I can’t even pretend to aim for such a goal. For any given group of 25 students who start the semester, I can assume that 4–5 of them will drop the course, another 3–4 will never quite warm up to the idea that capitalism (or white supremacy, or patriarchy, etc.) needs to be resisted, 12–15 will be sympathetic to at least one of the political causes at stake in our readings but still not see the value in engaging in resistance (because “nothing ever changes anyway,” or because activism makes them uncomfortable, or because they believe that someone else should do the work involved), which will leave a *very* tiny handful of students who get to the end of the course and are willing to go out and (try to) change the world themselves.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the one semester when I came closest (which, to be clear, still wasn’t the same as “close”) to seeing more than just a handful of students inspired to become activists themselves was the fall of 2016, when the US presidential election helped to underscore the systemic nature of the political problems at stake in the course with great urgency and clarity. At the same time, however, this was also an iteration

of the course that highlighted some of the more troubling contradictions in how pedagogy has been institutionalized. The student who was the most dramatically transformed that semester was also the group's most epic failure—at least when viewed in conventional ways. This student was quite explicit about what (he thought) the course had done for/to him, even going so far as to write on the course blog: “You’ve radicalized me, Gil.” And he was clearly thrilled to find himself activated this way. At the same time, and for reasons that weren’t necessarily related to the course at all, he also ultimately found himself incapable of doing the quantity and quality of written work he needed to do to earn a passing grade. From my perspective, he was one of the most impressive success stories I’ve ever had in an undergraduate classroom: someone who was visibly, deeply transformed by the course (though I would maintain that he understated his own role in that process, while overstating mine). From a more traditional perspective, however, he wasn’t a success story at all: he was just another student who failed.⁴

To bring this back to the main issue at hand, we can teach our undergraduates any number of things that are valuable to the practice of doing cultural studies—how to engage in specific types of critical analysis, how to use particular research methodologies, how to write better essays, and so on—but we can’t really teach them one of the main things that distinguishes cultural studies from other intellectual practices: that is, how to be political. The vast majority of US undergraduates, after all, don’t bring a political head into the game. In fact, they often actively resist the notion that politics belongs in the academy—and to be fair to them, this is largely because, by the time we see them in our classrooms, they’ve spent nearly two decades being trained in schools that insist, not only that those institutions are politically neutral and/or objective (even when

⁴There isn’t enough space here to do the subject the justice it deserves, but this would be a good moment to point out that most traditional measures of both “good” teaching and “good” learning—for example, grades, course evaluations, and so on—are deeply flawed. Outside of contexts where our primary pedagogical goals involve the rote memorization of facts (and maybe not even then), there’s usually a vast chasm between what we most want our students to learn and what we can actually assess in a meaningful way.

unavoidably they're no such thing), but that neutrality and objectivity are *supposed* to be the guiding principles of such institutions.⁵

Even in those rare and wonderful moments when, against all odds, we see visible evidence that one of our students has become “woke” (in one form or another), those breakthroughs are *not* the same thing as us having produced a full-fledged cultural studies practitioner. At best, we've set someone on a path that might, eventually, lead them into cultural studies. But they still have a lot to learn, and we haven't taught them to be “woke” as much as we've exposed them to some new ideas and (where applicable) encouraged their enthusiasm for engaging with the world in a new-to-them way.

Teaching Graduate Students

Not surprisingly, graduate students are more likely to arrive in our classrooms with strong critical/political lenses already in place. After all, they typically continue their education beyond their college years because they have a desire to study and/or teach a subject that already interests them. That helps. Still, for most of us, graduate education is constrained by heavy pressures to professionalize our students, and nowhere near enough liberty (for us or for them) to engage in radical forms of intellectual experimentation or collaboration. The dominant messages from university administrations to everyone involved in the process of graduate education—faculty, students, and staff—are all about efficiency and metrics. Get the “best” students (i.e., the ones with the highest GREs and GPAs) into our programs. Get as much teaching labor out of them—for as little money as possible—while they're on campus. Get them through the system as quickly as possible. Lather. Rinse. Repeat. This is not fertile ground for cultural studies to grow in.

It's not a coincidence that the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham produced what is

⁵This is one of the many lies about education that our students have been told. Some of the others are summed up here: <https://www.gilrodman.com/2015/02/01/lies-we-tell-our-students-rerun-sunday/>

widely recognized as groundbreaking and innovative work in cultural studies precisely because it was *not* organized or managed in conventional ways. If one reads the personal reflections (Connell and Hilton 2016; Vincent and Grossberg 2013) of people who spent time at the Centre, it becomes clear that even though many of them have different interpretations of what the Centre was about (its goals, its successes, its failures, its legacy), they are in universal agreement about how *unusual* the Centre was compared to other sites of postgraduate education.

When the Centre was founded in 1964, it had no set curriculum, since there was no history within the university of anything called “cultural studies” to draw upon. As such, there was no way for the Centre’s faculty to claim—or even pretend—that they had already achieved a mastery of a subject that they would then convey to the students. And so those faculty (Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall) and several years worth of students had to make the project up together.

Even after the proverbial ball had been rolling for *just* long enough that there might be *some* semblance of a sedimented set of reading lists that newcomers needed to familiarize themselves with, the Centre was still far too marginalized and short-staffed—it never had more than three full-time faculty on staff—to deliver anything that looked like a conventional curriculum. And so, deep into the 1970s, the collective hurly-burly of staff and students all making things up together as they went along was the norm.

Even today, however, there’s still a fundamental problem with creating a workable syllabus for a cultural studies seminar: a problem rooted in the linearity of a semester, and in trying to create a sequence of readings that helps cultural studies novices make sense of such a sprawling, heterogeneous, and internally contentious project. It seems to me there are three major options for how to deal with the flow of a cultural studies seminar, but none of them are entirely satisfactory.

First, one could work through the history of cultural studies chronologically—reconstructing the project from the ground up for each new crop of students—though this is undoubtedly too big a project for a single semester, and it requires trying to familiarize twenty-first-century US students with the various political, cultural, social, institutional (etc.) contexts that gave rise to the CCCS in the UK in the mid-1960s—assuming,

of course, that one accepts that Birmingham is the place where one needs to start such a history. And that's not a safe assumption at all.⁶

Second, one could begin with examples of strong cultural studies scholarship and then try to backfill the history, debates, theory, and so on that laid the conditions of possibility for those exemplars. But then one runs into the problem of trying to explain how, for example, Jan Radway's *A Feeling for Books* (1997); Paul Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000); Meaghan Morris' *Too Soon Too Late* (1998); Larry Grossberg's *Caught in the Crossfire* (2005); and Carol Stable's *White Victims, Black Villains* (2006)—five *very* different books, in terms of their subject matter, research methods, and theoretical frameworks—are all somehow part of the same larger project. In the absence of some sort of meta-discourse about what cultural studies is, newcomers to the project will most likely struggle to understand the nature of that larger project very well simply by looking at isolated examples of it—and the ways that multiple examples will diverge from one another will make such an approach more confusing, rather than less (see Rodman 2013).

Third (and this is the approach that I take), one could begin with the meta-discourse about cultural studies—the sizable body of literature that wrestles with the project's definitional questions (what it is, what it should be, and so on)—and then move on to more concrete examples of cultural studies research. But this approach can be frustrating for students, who find themselves struggling to make sense of the abstract debates about the general characteristics of a project that (1) is still very new to them and (2) actively refuses to be defined in straightforward ways. After two or three weeks of this approach, even students who appreciate the reasons why cultural studies has historically resisted efforts to be defined cleanly will often say that feel more lost and confused than when the semester began. All that meta-discourse may capture the actual fluidness of cultural studies accurately, but it also makes it harder for newcomers to the

⁶This isn't the place to address in full the long history of cultural studies folks questioning the proper place of Birmingham in the history of cultural studies (see Rodman 2015, 120–157). Suffice it to say that there are multiple legitimate versions of cultural studies' origins, and that the Centre doesn't figure prominently in all of them. Nonetheless, the Centre is an oft-cited choice for cultural studies' birthplace, and—for better or worse—it is (probably) the first site where the term “cultural studies” was adopted and broadly recognized as a label for a particular kind of blending of intellectual and political projects.

project to recognize cultural studies work when they see it or know how to produce cultural studies work of their own.

In different ways, all of these approaches suffer from the fact that cultural studies is—arguably, by design—an unstructured, heterogeneous amalgamation of projects and, as such, it defies almost any attempt to explain it using a linear narrative. Regardless of where one starts to learn about cultural studies, one is beginning somewhere in the middle of a story that is incredibly difficult to follow without knowing something substantial about other bits of the story that one hasn't gotten to yet. Short of trying to work through three (seemingly) different seminar-sized reading lists simultaneously—the cultural studies equivalent of being tossed into the deep end of the pool in order to learn how to swim—one will almost inevitably begin the task of learning cultural studies confused and frustrated.

It doesn't help matters that, at this stage in its history, cultural studies is arguably too big a project to squeeze into a single course—and has been so for a long time now. For example, the graduate seminar introduction to cultural studies that I took from Larry Grossberg in 1988 involved ten books plus two giant coursepacks of photocopied essays. Each of those coursepacks were about two inches thick, double-sided, and most of those pages contained a two-page spread in landscape format on each side. It was far more reading than anyone could tackle in a single semester. Eventually, Larry started teaching that seminar as a two-semester sequence—and then, later, as a *three*-semester sequence—but that expansion of the course's time frame *wasn't* about spreading out that massive reading load to be more manageable: it was about being able to *add* new material to the mix to cover more contemporary cultural studies work.

All that said, I think that it's certainly possible—maybe even common—for students to come into a graduate program knowing little or nothing at all about cultural studies and, four (or five, or seven, or nine) years later, come out the other side being proficient enough to claim (quite legitimately) that they do cultural studies themselves. They've obviously learned something about doing cultural studies during grad school that they didn't know before—and I'm willing to accept that strong faculty guidance can be a vital part of that process—but I'm less

convinced that this transformation is about us as teachers anywhere near as much as it is about them as students.

At the end of the day, after all, we still come up against the different senses of “teaching” that I discussed at the start of this essay. Regardless of subject matter, after all, we don’t actually teach students anything. They learn. Or they don’t. But the change in the state of their knowledge depends more on what they do than what we do. We may put various facts and ideas in front of them. We may present them with ways of seeing and understanding the world that are revelatory to them. But the real work of education is still theirs, not ours. On a good day, we show them doors they hadn’t noticed before. Maybe we even unlock and open those doors for them. But they still have to walk through them on their own. To actually learn cultural studies—what it is, how to do it, why it matters—involves going through one of those doors and then living on the other side of it long enough to find and embrace a new way of being in the world. But that last bit is the bit that we, as teachers, can’t really do much about.

Teaching Anyone/Everyone Else

The problems I’ve described above are largely byproducts of the university as an institution. And, arguably, any good cultural studies approach to a question would require us to think *outside* the logics of existing institutions. So what happens if we take the university out of the equation? Can one teach cultural studies more generally? Can one teach outside of (or around, or in spite of) the institution? Maybe. But probably not. The more I’ve tried to teach cultural studies, the more convinced I am that it’s a fundamentally unteachable project. The best I think any of us can do is to give people some things to read, offer some advice and encouragement and constructive feedback, and hope that our students eventually find their own way into the project.

If there really is a way to teach other people how to do cultural studies, it’s probably something closer to the old martial arts movie shtick where the young neophyte goes to the old master to learn some ancient, noble art of combat and where said neophyte then spends most of his or her

time performing seemingly irrelevant, yet humbling, tasks—making rice, fetching water, raking sand—that help said neophyte to unlearn all the bad habits of the mind and body that the world has already taught him or her. And it is only after endless repetition of those small, supposedly meaningless tasks that the *real* training—or, more precisely, what a misguided outsider would think of as “the real training”—can begin. It’s a slow, arduous process, and not everyone can master it.

Some of you are undoubtedly thinking that, in spite of my earlier objections, what I’ve just described sounds a lot like an extended metaphor for grad school. And so (supposedly) we can—and do—teach people how to do cultural studies all the time. Except, of course, things aren’t that simple. After all, the underlying lesson of many (most? all?) of those martial arts films is that the old master doesn’t possess a truth that he or she passes on to the pupil. Instead, the pupil must ultimately find the truth inside himself or herself. The Sacred Art cannot simply be passed on from one person to another, like a pebble from hand to hand, even in an extended tutelage by the most skilled master and the most promising of pupils. In the end, the teacher is actually more of a guide—or perhaps a goad (especially if we move back to the graduate school side of my extended metaphor)—but the *real* learning always comes from the student. Always.

Embedded in all those martial arts films is another seemingly implausible truth: that is, that teaching is really all about failure. Those of us who teach for a living rarely admit this, but in our hearts, we know it’s true. The only *truly* effective teachers—at least in the second sense of the term described at the start of this chapter—are the ones that live (and apparently thrive) in the imaginations of rabid right-wing pundits: the folks who go off (and also go on and on and on) about the dangers of tenured radicals who indoctrinate their students with the dangerous evils of marxism and feminism and environmentalism and queerness and anti-racism and other unspeakable forms of left-wing poison. *These* mythical teachers march into classrooms and magically transform vulnerable, complacent, God-fearing young people into fire-breathing leftists hell-bent on destroying the nation from the inside out.

Back in the real world, however, anyone who’s ever spent more than a week in front of a room of US undergraduates knows how hard it is to get

them even to *read* what you've assigned them—much less consider what that reading has to say long enough for it to move their worldview even a millimeter from where it was before. Even the most inspiring teachers, working with the brightest students, routinely tell stories about how many of their young charges sail through their courses without seeming to be affected much by them, one way or another.

I sound crankier than I actually am about my students. But I'm only not-so-cranky in real life because, even as I've maintained high standards, I've learned to lower my expectations for what a "good" semester can actually accomplish. I figure that I've had a successful semester if, out of a class of 30, as many as 3 of them show signs that they've been transformed by the course in positive and significant fashion. I can usually manage to hit that percentage—maybe even exceed it on occasion—but that still means that I fail much more often than not. And I suspect I'm not unusual in this regard.

Let me close with a thought experiment that (hopefully) helps to demonstrate at least a piece of my argument here. Think about the major cultural studies figures who passed through the CCCS, in one way or another, at some point in its brief but influential history: Brunsdon, Chambers, Clarke, Coward, Curti, Dyer, Ellis, Gilroy, Grossberg, Hebdige, McRobbie, Morley, Mort, Williamson. It's a long list of amazing scholars, and it's one of the reasons why Birmingham is accorded (and deserves) a special place in the cultural studies story. And let's assume, just for the sake of argument, that we can single handedly credit Stuart Hall with teaching cultural studies to all these people. It's a grandiose claim (and one that Hall would no doubt have been the first to reject), given what we know about how things worked at the Centre during its heyday, but let's roll with it anyway, while understanding that it *overstates* Hall's actual influence.

Now think about all those other people whose names we do *not* know—but whom we can be sure existed, since it's not as if the Centre managed to survive for as long as it did averaging less than a single student per year—who did *not* go on to become cultural studies *anythings*. Then think about how much longer that list of names must be. Hall "taught" those people too—but he "failed" to teach them cultural studies. The list of names we know is a version of what John Clarke has called "the

diversity that won” (quoted in Grossberg 1995, 32): that is, the tiny, if chaotic, piece of a larger story that is the main (if not the only) piece that the rest of the world knows anything about. But our list of “failures” is always much longer than our list of successes.⁷

And this suggests, in turn, that our successes aren’t ever really *ours*. Whatever we may contribute to them, they still depend heavily on our students. We don’t teach them as much as they teach themselves.

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⁷When I presented a very early version of this essay at a conference, Michael Denning suggested that the known successes in the list of former CCCS students above might actually be better understood as the *failures*. These, after all, are the people who wound up in the academy, rather than in the proverbial trenches. I’m not sure I agree with this sentiment entirely. Is Angela McRobbie (for instance) *really* a “failure” because she carved out a successful academic career against all odds? That seems like too harsh an assessment. But part of what I value about Denning’s suggestion is the acknowledgment that what counts as a pedagogical success story may not always be the obvious outcome. At least some of our pedagogical “failures” may actually turn out to be successes in ways that we never actually witness.

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