

Between Many Masks: Teaching Stigmatized Students

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“Every man shows you a mask, no human eye can bear reality.”

--Sophocles

Introduction

In this article I apply Gerald Berreman’s theories of ethnographic reflexivity to teaching. I use reflections from his seminal piece, *Behind Many Masks* (Berreman 1962), as a way to think about issues of masking, performance, and narrative structures encountered in the classroom.

This is an autoethnographic account. I am examining my classroom as “the field,” a place where I encounter foreign others, much in the same way I encounter others in my ethnographic fieldwork. I am looking specifically at myself as a teacher and faculty member of the General College (GC) of the University of Minnesota, a program designed to increase the educational access of underrepresented populations. It is a place, like all places, where people wear masks and project them upon others, a place where power intercedes to determine which masks matter, and a place where, at least on occasion, masks are modified. In order to explain that process, it is first necessary to describe the institution and the ideologies that drive it.

I teach in a developmental education program. I was hired to teach cultural anthropology and conduct developmental education research. I am sure this raises the same question for nearly everyone reading this: “What is developmental education?”

Developmental education is what has become of “remedial education.” Liberal educators, uncomfortable with the implications of the term “remedial,” have adopted this new title. However, there are significant differences between remedial and developmental education. The most important difference is that developmental educators do not construct the student as a set of deficits in need of correction or remediation, but rather as someone who is in the process of developing new knowledge and skills. Ultimately, we are all “developmental” learners. This linguistic and philosophical shift has certainly not solved all of the contradictions and conundrums associated with remedial education. However, the goal of this paper is not to provide a critique of the larger field, but instead to discuss the actual experience of teaching in one such program.¹

My recent work fits under the rubric of applied anthropology. In my second year on the General College faculty, I have begun studying issues of academic efficacy and educational justice from various anthropological perspectives, including applying that which I have gained through completing international fieldwork in Mexico and Central America. However, I still have not yet taken the time to develop a truly anthropological theory of developmental education in a larger sense. To begin that process, I will turn to the work of one of my first and most fundamental anthropological influences, Gerald Berreman.

Behind Many Masks

Developmental education, as a profession and practice, sorely needs the sort of comparative cultural theory anthropology offers. The majority of research published to date is practice oriented, a "how to" discourse based on the testing of various teaching methods. As a field with historical links to developmental psychology, much of the theoretical focus is on students as individual learners to the exclusion of wider sociological considerations. Considerations of culture, in the anthropological sense, are almost completely missing from the research literature.

It is not my intent nor ability to fill that gap in this paper. However, this conference and publication concerning the life and work of Gerald Berreman has provided me with an excellent opportunity to begin developing an anthropological theory of developmental education. In 1992 I read all of Dr. Berreman's writings for the purpose of writing a seminar paper concerning his life and work. It was the single most useful and interesting thing I have done as an anthropologist, and it continues to pay dividends. I have found his work extremely useful for thinking about issues of educational inequality and injustice.

No work has been more useful in this regard than Dr. Berreman's classic Prologue to *Hindus of the Himalayas* (1963), "Behind Many Masks," a work that was also published in a Society for Applied Anthropology Monograph (1962). This honest, groundbreaking consideration of the intersubjectivity in ethnographic fieldwork continues to resonate in the subdiscipline of cultural anthropology. Similarly, that work has helped me rethink the intersubjective elements of teaching.

The two professional roles, teacher and ethnographer, share a great deal in common. As is true in ethnographic fieldwork, we enter our classrooms as solitary outsiders, representing institutional agendas our student-informants may not fully comprehend or trust. Furthermore, as with ethnography, to be effective as teachers we must find ways to level the inevitable social distance between ourselves, as well traveled, professional outsiders, and our more localized student-informants.

As in ethnographic fieldwork, good teaching requires that we become students of our student-informants so that we might learn about them and from them. In short,

we must establish that most essential of ethnographic preconditions: rapport. Without such a relationship, meaningful communication (literally meaning “to make common”) is impossible.

Although the goals of teachers and ethnographers are also quite different, the two experiences share a great deal in common. Therefore, reflexive analyses concerning ethnographic fieldwork—of which “Behind Many Masks” was one of the first, and remains perhaps the best—can be usefully applied in order to better understand ourselves as teachers.

Secrets and Lives

Berreman begins “Behind Many Masks” with the following:

Ethnographers have all too rarely made explicit the methods by which the information reported in their descriptive and analytical works was derived. Even less frequently have they attempted systematic descriptions of those aspects of the field experience which fall outside of a conventional method, but are crucial to the research and results.
[1962:xvii]

The same can be said of pedagogical research and practice. Analyses of teaching tend not to include the less tangible, but greatly important issues of identity (who is teaching whom), agenda (what are the often unstated goals of the instructor and how might they clash with those of the students), social effect (what is the purpose of teaching and learning?), and psychological effect (how does teaching change teachers’ and students’ psyches?).

Much of the literature seems to imply that if teacher B applies method C, as first suggested by author/teacher A, on students D-Z, the same outcome will be manifested as originally experienced by teacher A (assuming, of course, that we take teacher A and her assessment methods at face value). There is a sort of positivistic faith in the developmental education literature that we work on solid ground. Students are students. What works in one context, at one moment, for a given set of purposes, will probably work in other contexts as well. Teaching is looked at as if it were a simple, predictable matter of chemical interactions. Apply 3 grams of chemical A in solution B and the result will be compound C.

However, as empirical investigators of cultural existence, we know that such assumptions simply do not hold. Only through false belief in the solidity of our own rhetorical constructions can we convince ourselves that the social world, including the classroom, is amenable to that sort of reductionism. We teach, learn, and live on the shifting sands of cultural reality, inhabiting matrices that are not of our own making and, therefore, are only partly amenable to such superficial experimental control.

Unfortunately, a fairly unreflexive positivism still dominates the educational literature (a colleague at the American Educational Research Association argued that this is the result of “Physics Envy”). As a result, many of the interesting and messy cultural elements of educational research are edited out long before such studies reach publication.

This is less true in ethnography, thanks to reflexive researchers like Berreman. Yet when Berreman wrote his seminal article in 1962, such honest reflection was mainly reserved for private diaries or discussion with only the most intimate of confidants. According to Berreman, part of the reason ethnographers tended to ignore the role of such ugly intangibles as “difficulty of morale and rapport” was a sort of isolated embarrassment on the part of the individual ethnographer, that she alone had not achieved the ethnographic ideal (1962:xvii). She thus entered the “conspiracy of silence” in order to protect her work from the sort of professional oversight that self-reflexive honesty can engender. The properly indoctrinated ethnographer put on a professional mask in an effort to cover her human failures, failures that are not only inevitable, but also essential to ethnographic fieldwork. Perhaps present tense is in order. Despite our critical advances, the publishing, ranking, and promotional disciplines of Anthropology still work against the sort of honesty evident in Berreman’s provocative piece.

If “maskwork” is evident in ethnography, it is doubly true in pedagogical research. The educational research literature represents a conspiracy of silence regarding our inevitable failures as teachers, while resounding with a level of methodological cheerleading, if not bragging, that would make a professional wrestler blush. No method ever seems to fail, be it collaborative, cooperative, or otherwise. Our complaints about student apathy and ill behavior—complaints that echo throughout the backstage space of the faculty lounge and conference—are effectively filtered out of our written research record.

Indeed, under normal conditions I would not be writing about the moment in class last week when two Somali students corrected my misinterpretation of the relationship between *purdah*, veiling, chastity, and marriage. I had misinterpreted a class reading (Fernea and Fernea 2000). Yet, it was in that encounter that I, and the class, learned. In pedagogy, as in ethnography, it is usually through failure and reflection that we approach new truths. Berreman helped make that sort of honest and productive reflection possible in anthropology. I believe that a similar model is needed in the field of developmental education.

Gods and Monsters

“Every ethnographer, when he reaches the field,” explains Berreman, “is faced immediately with accounting for himself before the people he proposes to learn to know” (1962:xviii). The people I propose “to learn to know” each semester have

been assigned to an institution that unkind outsiders have labeled “GC High,” “Thirteenth Grade,” or worse, “Ghetto College.” As the last label demonstrates, there are racist connotations to these terms (Pedelty 2001). GC students are sometimes treated like the Pahari Gerald Berreman studied in his Himalayan fieldwork. They are “thought by people of the plains to be ritually, spiritually, and morally inferior.” GC students are similarly stigmatized. Even the Governor of their state believes they do not belong at the University (Smetanka and Baden 2001).

Not surprisingly, my students feel stigmatized. Because of this, they have a tendency to view me in a double role. On one hand, I am on the tenure-track faculty of the University of Minnesota, an institution that has segregated them from the general student population. Therefore, they see me as responsible for their stigmatized status. I am the bad-cop.

At the same time, I am an instructor in the General College, and thus not “really” part of the larger university community. In sum, I am not a real professor, and mine is, therefore, not a real college class. I am a good-cop, but not one you would need to take seriously.

It is hard to know how to wear this good-cop/bad-cop mask. Nearly everything I do can be viewed as fitting within the role. Challenge students and I am putting them down, show them a more human face and I may reinforce the view that I am not one of the illusory “real” professors they expect to see in college. They expect the professor to be distant, on stage, lecturing from afar, not chatting with them face-to-face. As a result, the same teaching behaviors that have worked well for me in other institutions are often perceived as acts of either repression or condescension at GC.

As I search for other masks and performances, I routinely find myself returning to play this increasingly familiar good-cop/bad-cop character. Identity “is a performance” (Brunner 1998:93), and it is always easier to play the part an audience has selected than seek alternative roles and plot lines.

I have found it useful to draw upon mythological metaphors in order to understand this mask-making process.² I equate my good-cop/bad-cop mask to that of Tezcatlipoca, the Aztec god whose “four unfolding” includes both the advocates and tormentors of humanity in one and the same figure. Like Tezcatlipoca, I hold up a “smoking mirror” to the students. I am a massive other in the front of the room who, from their projected perspective, capriciously plays with their lives.

Many GC students have not had positive experiences, on the whole, with past instructors during their K-12 educations. They view instructors as disciplining and filtering agents who evaluate their intellectual worth. The teacher’s goal is to “weed them out.” Whether or not I adapt that disposition, many students will place me in that

role, making my disciplinary identity double a very real presence in the classroom. In this disciplinary persona I wear the dark mask of Mictlantecuhtli, the god of the Mexica underworld who rules a kingdom of commoner souls. As I collect their papers I symbolically place their severed heads on my pedagogical skull-rack. Their blood and failure replenishes the earth and educational system, allowing it to recycle itself. I am an agent of a monolithic educational system. I am gatekeeper and king.

As Berreman noted in his groundbreaking study, ethnographers also contend with identity doubles. The ethnographer becomes a projection of power, a physical manifestation of the community's greatest fears, a dangerous stranger. His Pahari informants were quite reticent to engage with him initially, having had mostly negative interactions with most previous outsiders. After all, most such outsiders were representatives of state power, such as tax collectors and military recruiters.

The same is true for students in developmental programs. K-12 instructors have been responsible for making decisions that negatively affected their life chances. No matter how much that I try to differentiate myself from those past phantoms, students know that, ultimately, I am also sitting in judgment. My grade could mean the difference between successful transfer and continued educational failure. I must ask them to take the responsibility for their fates, while establishing trust. That is no easy task.

I found that establishing trust took fairly little time and effort when teaching at Berkeley, the University of Minnesota, Morris, and the Western College Program of Miami University. The students in each of those selective institutions were, on the whole, relatively self-confident and had experienced fairly positive interactions with their past instructors.

In those cases, I wore the golden mask of Tonatiuh, the sun god. Just as Mexica elites would be given the otherworldly reward of riding the sky with Tonatiuh, so too, the students in those institutions viewed me as the facilitator of their continued academic and life success. That is more than just a slight exaggeration, as anyone who has ever taught in an elite institution knows. The teacher-student relationship is never an unqualified bond of care and respect, no matter where one teaches. We are just as often the model of what not to become, underpaid nerds whose fate must be avoided at all costs.

Despite the widespread view that their assignment to GC is a punishment, our students also hold many positive views of GC. In my interviews with individuals and focus groups, students have cited the small classes and individualized attention from instructors as relative advantages when compared to their main alternative, the College of Liberal Arts. Upon transfer to the degree-granting units of the University, the majority of GC students express generally positive views of their General College experience.

Although students do not necessarily exhibit such positive views during their GC tenure, the transformation toward this more positive view begins in the GC classroom. Yet, I find myself wanting it to happen more quickly. The ghosts of stigma, fear, and potential failure take an inordinate level of our classroom energy, energy that could be put into learning. I want my GC students to be into it. I want them to want more out of their education than to simply fulfill requirements and bide their time while they await transfer to the Carlson School of Business or the College of Liberal Arts. However, I know that to accomplish that sort of transformation I must also be willing to become something else, something more and different than what their experience and training tells them that I, and education, should be about.

However, lament alone does not achieve the sort of transformative educational experience I am referring to. Like Sisyphus, it requires a willingness to start over every four months, reborn as Tezcatlipoca. I work to shed the mask, or at least change it, seeking to become a co-learner, a pedagogical protagonist engaging students in the pursuit of truth while engendering a love for learning.

And what of the masks I place on my students? I like to think that I am aware and critical enough of the masking process to develop their masks on an individual basis rather than place categorical façades upon them. However, every time I feel surprised that a student of identity X writes paper Y or makes statement Z in class, I let myself in on the fact that I, too, have been subconsciously placing students in roles that have little to do with their classroom performance and everything to do with predefined cultural identities, if not stereotypes. I am surprised by the staunch Republican from the inner city, the cheerleader who critically dissects patriarchy, or the frat guy who passionately argues for limits on corporate ownership of the public domain. Much more unsettling is my surprise when a GC student exceeds all of my academic expectations. This happens several times a semester, and with multiple students. Before my academically-correct forebrain kicks in, I think to myself: “Why is she in GC, she should be in _____.” Deep inside, I also expect GC students to perform at below average levels, even though I hold them to the same degree of rigor I applied when teaching at other institutions.

It is at that moment that I need to remind myself of the fact that my high school grades were lower than many of theirs, that my first college grades were C’s, that my students have a range of talents I could never duplicate, that they exhibit a range of skills and knowledge that has been discounted by the academy, that class and/or racial injustice has placed many of them here, that intelligence is a slippery culturally-defined term, and that the whole academic ranking system is bullshit.

It is only natural that I would provide a collective identity to my GC classes. However, as my internal “why is she in GC?” dialogue demonstrates, that collective identity betrays a view of my students that is tinged by a set of lowered expectations. In other words, what I am fighting is far from an external, repressive process, but is

instead a hegemonic process wherein I have become a full participant. The mask is not merely an oppressive, external artifice, but something partly generated from within. Marx argued that the critical scholar maintains “a ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be” (1978:13). The first orientation is the more difficult to achieve; it is easier to fight a purely external force than it is to contest an ideology that penetrates your own thoughts and behaviors.

Once again, this illustrates my need to work through the script, character, and masks, rather than to imagine myself magically outside it, pretending that I can wish away or rewrite the narrative. As Berreman has revealed in his work, our masks matter. Surface protestations—“that’s not me!”—cannot undo the performance for which the audience, director, and institution have created us. As was the case in Berreman’s ethnographic ordeal, I believe that it is necessary to struggle through these contradictions, rather than ignore or deny them.

Impression Management

I came to know how my students feel about GC through filmed formal interviews, focus sessions, paired student interview projects, and informal classroom discussions. Cognizant of these common student perceptions, I now set to work immediately at the beginning of each semester with a program of perception-management tactics not unlike the efforts made by ethnographers to legitimate themselves to informants. As an ethnographer and teacher, I see the two engagement processes as similar. I must appear both approachable and, at the same time, professionally competent. Too much emphasis on either goal will often subvert the other.

It takes more time and effort to build rapport and trust in a developmental teaching context than it does when teaching in a selective admissions institution. Just the slightest misstep can confirm that I am, in fact, the man behind the mask. What might be a typical, well-meaning, even respectful challenge to a student’s statement, for example, may instead be mistaken as censure. Conversely, students in other institutions are much more likely to accept such efforts at face value.

Recently, I began to imagine that perhaps it was a geographical issue instead, that perhaps Minnesotans were extra sensitive to these issues. However, I was reminded this summer, while teaching a group of mainly upper division, non-GC students, that Minnesotans are no more or less likely to throw themselves into productive classroom debate and discussion than Californians or Ohioans. Instead, the reticence and fear evidenced in the GC classroom has everything to do with the students’ stigmatized status and the weight of past educational experiences. The teacher cannot expect to step into such a situation and simply hit the ground running. The teacher, as dangerous stranger, must first work to establish a level of trust, a trust

wherein the student comes to believe that this time her ideas and interests truly will be valued.

The ethnographer's actions also put her in constant danger of fulfilling the dangerous outsider role. It is the expected role, the role that will be seen regardless of the player's intentions. For example, when Berreman began his fieldwork by conducting a genealogical census, he was suspected of spying on the community, perhaps for the purpose of military recruitment, or worse, foreign subversion. It was not until four months had passed that the young ethnographer was able to overcome such "overt opposition" to his anthropological activities.

How did Berreman work this miracle? Mainly with time and patience. He demonstrated over time, through painstaking performance, that he could be trusted. However, some performances are much more important than others. In Berreman's case, the pivotal scene was an impromptu speech. Combining praise for the local culture with promises that his work might, in some small way, give the village greater voice, he was able to sufficiently quell the opposition. Although disappointed that he was not "borne aloft" and paraded through the village based on this "stirring speech" he nevertheless had turned the corner toward a meaningful relationship with the community (1963:xxv).

When things go well in my GC classroom, I am also able to modify my informant-students' teacher archetypes. I am able to remake my teaching mask. Unfortunately, as opposed to ethnographic fieldwork, I must do it in a relatively short amount of time. Four months after I encounter my stigmatized students, they have exited my classes. Therefore, sometimes the entire time passes without such an epiphanal performance ever taking place. I simply retain the Tezcatlipoca-Mictlantecuhtli mask they have assigned me, or worse yet, I become Xipe Totec, Lord of the Flayed Skin, who, per the name, appropriates more than the victim's spirit. As I fight against their image of teacher, I become even more of a demon, robbing them of the more predictable plotline they have come to expect. I give them new ways to fail.

Oddly, students still rate my courses highly, even during the semesters where no such transformation takes place. This makes me wonder just how low the students' general educational expectations are. It is fairly clear to me that little of importance has been learned in such classes, just strings of information. It shows in their grades as well. The students consistently perform better, as measured by both subjective and more objective tests and assignments, in those classes where a new relationship is constructed. By that I do not just refer to the relationship between the students and me, but also to their relationship with each other, GC, and the University.

However, I sense that many GC students have come to expect failure, and are conditioned to expect it. They expect education to be torture, and they have grown

accustomed to the disciplinary consequences, such as lower grades. The ritual gets replayed. It is not pleasurable, but it is at least predictable. Ultimately, as these teaching evaluations show, students don't blame me for what they view as the larger, cosmic drama, in which they have been selected to play the role of mediocre student.

Their expectations are too easily met, the roles too comfortable. That is all the more reason why a transformative experience is demanded in the developmental classroom. Only having experienced something better, more profound, do such expectations rise. That is what happened for me. I was a kid from rural Iowa with sub-par grades and little expectation that I would even pass my college classes, let alone excel in them. My instructors inspired me. If my class cannot also provide that, I feel that I have failed. I too am fighting the mask of failure.

I have far from exhausted the various masks I wear in the classroom. In fact, many of them are much more positive than the troubling faces described above. However, one final, difficult mask is worth mention. In my classes at GC, I wear the mask of Quetzalcoatl, the white god, the feathered serpent. Like Cortez among the Mexica, the students use familiar metaphors to understand who I am, what I am, and what my disposition is toward them.

For many students, my primary identity is racial. I play the White Man. Although beneath "my masks are many selves, and not all of them are referential to bloodline" (Brunner 1998:93), my most fundamental mask is determined by melanin.

In my case, the White case, inordinate power is ceded to my mask, further adding to that which has already been taken. This mask is the result of a bizarre historical sequence combining vitamin D deficiency, geographic circumstances, crude accumulation, and ethnocentric malice. This is the main costume I wear into my classroom, a sign derived from centuries of privilege and oppression. It is a meaningless mask, however, without the dramaturgical assistance of my students. They must decide what roles they are to play in the racial identity drama, and in so doing will partially decide upon mine. We construct each other, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.

When Hernan Cortez first arrived in Mexico, Moctezuma II, Emperor of the Mexica, believed that he was a manifestation of Quetzalcoatl, a god who was both feared and revered.³ Returning from the East on a raft of serpents, Quetzalcoatl was coming home to retake his kingdom. This inspired insecurity and fear. The gods are to be placated, fed blood in order to replenish the earth (although Quetzalcoatl abhorred human sacrifice), but never welcomed into one's home or onto the human plane of existence. Such direct attention constituted a crisis. Such crises were generally inspired by human failure, such as the failure to properly perform a key ritual. Similarly, it is best if the teacher does not notice you. In the predictable lecture

and test classroom, there are ways to keep the teacher at arm's length, ways to avoid drawing attention to one's private struggle with class materials.

The Quetzalcoatl metaphor is dangerous and imperfect. However, there are useful parallels. Growing up in a racist society, many if not most of the people of color in my classes (about one third to one half of the students in my classes) have not had generally favorable encounters with white authorities. Yet, and here is the real conundrum for such students, they must now learn to perform the largely white discourses that dominate U.S. academe. Students must at some level appropriate cultural codes that are extremely foreign to them, learning to perform them without calling undo attention to their performances. If college is a foreign language for rich white, suburban kids, then it is doubly true for those outside the dominant culture.

I, as Quetzalcoatl, am a necessary cipher for such students. All things being equal, they would not choose to sequester themselves in a room with someone who has such inordinate power to judge and certify their academic worth. However, they need me, just like I need them. There is no good reason for them to trust me. For that matter, there is no good reason for me to trust them. It is an act of faith for both of us.

Despite the weight of past experience, often students do make that leap of faith. However, this seems to happen most often when I first clearly demonstrate faith in them. Unfortunately, this is never achieved through rhetorical persuasion alone. They have grown extremely skeptical of text and talk. Rather, it takes place when something in actual practice clashes with their ideological expectations. A student of X identity takes great interest in the thoughts of a student of Y identity. I, as teacher, do not react as expected when a student acts "cool" (i.e., anti-intellectual) to impress her classmates (usually with the opposite effect).

At the risk of sounding like a movie cliché, this transformation can usually be traced back to a pivotal single moment during the semester. Somebody in the class dared to step out of their prescribed role and challenge the basic notion of what it means to be a teacher and/or student.

The same basic narrative structure patterns those defining pedagogical moments and Berreman's ethnographic epiphany. Something happens to demonstrate to students that I value their thoughts and talents. Some sort of symbolic evidence convinces them that these bizarre classroom activities do indeed have transformative potential. Something happens to make them decide that neither am I there to punish them, nor is the class merely a time-wasting roadblock in their efforts to gain a decent job. Something happens to convince them that they matter, the class matters, and I matter.

Rarely does this take the form of an overt speech. I have found many GC students to be incredibly distrustful of both text and talk. They are somewhat reticent

to accept at face value the promises and protestations of a teacher. My White male mask is particularly bad for that purpose. What image could possibly be more laden with broken promises? Like the deceitful Physical Anthropologist, Ales Hrdlicka—a man who used scientific ritual to help dispossess the Anishinaabeg from their land (Youngbear-Tibbets 1991:51-53)—students may see in me accumulated centuries of subterfuge. To a certain extent I invite that, thrilled to see students make connections between their experiences and larger social and historical forces.

In fact, none of my given masks—professional (teacher), disciplinary (anthropologist), racial (white), or gendered (masculine)—can be drawn on to inspire the type of trust one needs to effectively teach in a colonized context. Because the complete removal of these masks is out of the question, they must instead be acknowledged and reworked through hard work. However, the level of work that I must put into making such a transition pales in comparison to the sort of efforts I ask of my student-informants. Theirs is the greater leap of faith.

The events that provoke such cathartic transformations often originate in crisis, just as was true for Berreman. In Berreman's case, a Brahmin Priest directly and publicly challenged him. The influential informant forced Berreman to declare his true motives. This provoked the sort of pivotal scene wherein the fate of every drama hangs, the moment that decides if the play is to become tragedy or seek a kinder resolution. For Berreman's, the result was ethnographic success. The ethnographer managed to become protagonist, and the narrative developed well. However, one senses in Berreman's relation that there was also serious potential for ethnographic tragedy, a lost ethnographic opportunity, or worse.

The crises in my classes are generally more pedestrian, ambitious assignments that fail to do anything but provoke apathy or, occasionally, overt hostility. What I intend to be engaging teaching methods are instead taken as excessive obligations by students who simply want to go through the standard educational rituals and routines. "Tell me what I need to know for the test," they say in not so many words. They beg to play Foucault's "docile body routine" (Brunner 1998:100; Foucault 1972:20-122), while I beg them to move out of it. However, they "have learned to play the game called school all too well" (Brunner 1998:100).

Yet, at the same time, many GC students have not learned the game well enough. They have repeatedly failed and/or resisted many of the routines, and the routines have failed them. This is where our small classes, the major advantage of GC, also become its greatest disadvantage. My classroom approximates the size of the high school classrooms from which they have just come, and I enroll approximately the same number of students as their high school classes. This aids in the deleterious sense of inertia students experience when entering GC. One of the advantages of many first year college classrooms and classes is that they look, smell, and feel much different than those encountered in high school. Large lecture halls and

small seminar rooms are perfect performance spaces in this regard. A forty-person schoolroom is not.

Given that the traditional educational rituals—lectures, testing, standardized assignments—have largely failed GC students, one might imagine that new ways of learning would be welcomed by them. To the contrary, academic failure has caused many such students to greatly fear pedagogical innovation. At least initially, they view independent field research projects, classroom performance techniques, and other nontraditional methods as another set of tests at which they might fail.

It is only by taking the class to that brink of total failure, however, that I have been able to achieve what I interpret as true success. It is there, in that liminal moment, when the comfortable, unsuccessful routine can be seen in a new light, reevaluated, questioned, and challenge. It is in that space that new, unknown, and potentially dangerous possibilities can be imagined. It is in that border space “between the masks” where “the unquiet self” (Brunner 1998:94) has a chance to challenge and change. It is there that critical thinking begins and perfunctory educational rituals end. It is there that high school can give way to college.

As mentioned above, this transformation is usually inspired by crisis. The first such incident involved an act of outright rebellion. I asked students to work in collaborative groups on their ethnographic projects. They were supposed to be discussing these projects, but instead decided to talk about issues of greater interest, such as parties, music, and weekend activities. Even my circulation from table to table did not interrupt this carnivalesque contagion. They were fully “off task.”

For some reason the whole thing provoked in me an existential crisis. I could not figure out why a bunch of people would bother to show up for a class only to act like that. Likewise, I could not figure out why I was there either. I stopped the class, described the situation as I saw it, and asked people to explain to me why they were at GC. Space does not allow for full explication of their grievances, but suffice it to say that the majority had to do with their sense of stigmatization as GC students. Whereas only a few students regularly spoke up in the class, nearly every single one of the 40 students spoke out during this pivotal discussion. The roles of teacher and students were reversed. I sat and learned.

The impromptu discussion produced an incredible catharsis. Perhaps the most illuminating outcome of the discussion for me was the incredible diversity of positions the students presented, once they broke through their shared mask of mediocrity. Rather than a monolithic set of students, these were instead people with very different pasts, personalities, and interests. Instead of a teacher vs. student dynamic, a more complex set of interactions began to develop. Rather than facile or forced consensus, a set of possibilities was put on the table where new arguments could be formed and

more serious consideration given them. When given the choice between acquiescence, discipline, or dialogue, I chose the latter in that instance.

It worked. The resulting conversation allowed me the opportunity to better explain my intent for the class in a way that the syllabus and lectures simply could not. More importantly, I was able to demonstrate that I was not simply a disciplining authority, but also a co-learner. I asked students to suggest better ways to develop class projects so that they might find them more engaging. My GC classes have increasingly improved, largely based on individual comments made during such watershed discussions. They have taught me how to teach them.

I had been through similar "name the game" moments in other classes, in other institutions, but never had I found them so crucial to the teaching and learning process. After this takes place in my GC classes, students who have previously refused to speak in class often become more engaged, willing to speak out regularly having been given a space to air their most fundamental feelings and misgivings about being a GC student. Like Berreman, I do not find my student-informants bearing me aloft in celebratory joy after these watershed scenes. However, they present invaluable opportunities to modify our masks, actions, dialogue, and plot narratives in pedagogically positive ways. One of the ironic outcomes of the process is that students generally exit these discussions feeling more positive about GC. Without fail, several GC and non-GC students in my class will come to the "defense" of the institution during these discussions.

There are probably ways to produce this sort of effect beyond simply waiting and hoping for it to organically develop. A GC colleague and artist, Patricia James, uses mask-making to do just that. Students literally explore their identities through the creation of physical masks. On two occasions in the past I have also had students create plaster and paint masks. In fact, students taught me how to do this.

However, I have never used the technique as a means of exploring the questions of identity, stigma, and performance that I am writing about here. Instead, I have used mask making in service of performance and in order to teach Mesoamerican mythology. It seems like a logical next step to use physical mask masking as a means to explore social, cultural, and psychological masking processes.

Inconclusion⁴

Sartre argued that "we only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us" (Fanon 1963:17). There are strong psychological, cultural, and institutional influences compelling teachers and learners not to think about that which others would make of us. Masks are measures of control, and all too often we simply adopt them for sake of comfort. Masks give us a familiar, communal role, no matter how deleterious that role or community might

ultimately be. There is comfort in the consensual, no matter how negatively it affects our abilities to learn, teach, live, create, and change.

I believe that most of my GC students have at some level internalized the masks of mediocrity that have been projected upon them. Yet, as Berreman's analysis of the caste system indicates, few people accept such stigma without some resistance.

Unfortunately, resistance relatively rarely coalesces into the sort of organized movements that can change the underlying conditions that produce such stigma. Ideologies of individuation, from capitalist consumption to grading, effectively mask the causes of collective privilege and oppression.

Nevertheless, as Berreman demonstrates through his entire corpus of work, there is great potential in reflexive analysis. We can begin to more effectively challenge inequality when we examine the pockmarked masks of privilege and oppression we have been handed. Four decades ago, Gerald Berreman gave us an excellent model for how to go about doing just that, through an honest narrative exploration of his actual interactions with others in the field.

Behind Many Masks provided an honest and critical deconstruction of the role that ethnographers play in the fieldwork drama. Others have gone on to study ethnography as text, but no one has produced a more meaningful and honest examination of actual interactions in the field. We would do well to apply that model when examining our important work as teachers of anthropology.

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¹ I realize that many anthropologists are developing critiques of developmental education as they read this. The term "developmental" brings along with it a great deal of ideological baggage. The parallels to the use of the term in international development, for example, are striking and somewhat disconcerting. However, like all important fields of action, developmental education is partly the result of negotiation between competing social forces, those that see it as going too far to democratize education and those that feel that it does not go far enough. I consider myself squarely part of the field of developmental education. While I promote alternative terminology like educational access and educational justice, the relevant field of action, for better and for worse, is that which is conducted under the rubric of developmental education.

² I would like to draw your attention to an excellent study of film metaphors and actual news events in relation to education. Suellyn Henke's *Representations of Secondary Urban Education: Infusing Cultural Studies into Teacher Education* (2000) is an insightful analysis of popular films, like *Dangerous Minds*, as they relate to actual teaching in inner city schools, adding the element of news coverage to further deepen and complicate the analysis. This is recommended reading for all who teach in such contexts or have an interest in educational justice.

³ A parallel story is told by Marshal Sahlins in *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981). His account of the Sandwich Islands encounter presents a useful framework for understanding the pedagogical encounters I am describing here. It is only through reference to mythological structures and metaphoric experience that we can begin to make sense of others and, through dialogue (comedic, tragic, or otherwise) create new narratives or, to follow the dramaturgical metaphor, new scripts.

⁴ Berreman once submitted an article manuscript with the concluding section entitled "Inconclusion," but was forced to change it back to "Conclusion" by the editor.