CHAPTER 3

AN ACTION RESEARCH INTERVENTION TOWARDS OVER-COMING "THEORY RESISTANCE" IN PHOTOJOURNALISM STUDENTS

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"THEORY RESISTANCE"

What follows is an account of a small-scale action research intervention designed to tackle a problem I have called "theory resistance," among undergraduate photojournalism students. By this I mean the resistance often expressed by these students to theoretical reading and writing, encountered in the required "Contextual Studies" unit of their course (also called the "History and Theory" unit). This is often related to a perceived or artificial polarization of "theory" and "practice." In this context, "practice" denotes the act of taking photographs, as opposed to the critical reading and writing that supplements and underpins this activity. Many students express a belief that this reading and writing is at best alienating and difficult, and at worst, a waste of time or a distraction from the "real work" of photography (see also Gimenez and Thomas Chapter 1, Adams Chapter 4 this volume).

Action research is a process in which a specific problem is identified and an experimental "intervention" designed and tested with a view to gaining insight into the problem and ultimately solving it (John Elliott, 2001; David Kember, 2000). This particular intervention, undertaken at a large Arts and Design university in the United Kingdom, explored the experiences of students in reading weekly set critical texts for this unit in their second year. It is based on the pedagogic principle that effective engagement with such texts is crucial in students' development as photojournalists, and that "theory resistance" is detrimental to their engagement with higher education as a whole, as well as to this photographic practice.

Because I have found that using metaphors is often helpful in explaining the value of critical texts, as well as how to tackle the reading involved—imagery such as sieves, onions, chopsticks and maps, for example, can help illustrate selective or step-by-step approaches to reading—I designed an intervention based on visualiza-

tion, in which students could collaboratively create visual models or metaphors by making simple drawings, and then discuss the implications of their drawings (Sarah Pink, 2006; Gillian Rose, 2007). Arlene Archer (2006) argues that rather than being tied solely to verbal representation, academic literacies can and should account for other modalities, notably the visual. Visualizing ideas through drawing might be understood both as a *way of communicating*, inasmuch as visual literacy is an academic literacy, and as a *practice* that might usefully "cut through" the power relations around difficult language, inasmuch as it transcends verbal language. This validation of a visual or pictorial approach is particularly useful among photojournalism students, who are often more comfortable communicating through (and about) images than words (see also Coleman Chapter 18, Stevens Chapter 19 this volume).

The intervention was based upon the following hypotheses: 1) students would find drawing helpful in articulating their feelings about reading; 2) they would benefit from recognizing that they were not alone in their concerns; 3) they would be able to create models for more effective reading; and 4) I would learn from seeing how the students represented their struggles, enabling me to design better teaching and learning activities. Of these hypotheses, the first, second and fourth were proved correct, while the third did not turn out as expected. Transformation for the teacher is a key part of the findings of my action research. More important than this however is the movement for students from "resistance" to acceptance of the contribution that reading theoretical texts can make to their practice as photographers, and also from a place of intimidation and shame in the face of difficult theoretical language to empowerment and (following bell hooks, 1994) freedom. In this process, the atmosphere within the teaching space is completely transformed, as trust is built between teacher and students through making explicit the tacit "oppression" of language.

DRAWING ON/AS AN ACADEMIC LITERACIES APPROACH

Students embark on the BA (Hons) Photojournalism course with a view to becoming photographers: from the beginning of the course they are practitioners of photography first and foremost, rather than writers or theorists. My approach in teaching theory must be sensitive to this. I aim to encourage students to take what they "need" from texts—to gain the confidence to be selective in what they read based on their own interests and practice, without being dismissive of the rest. There are a number of hurdles involved in this. My view is that while it tends to manifest itself as a dismissal of the value of theory, "theory resistance" is most often rooted in a lack of confidence; a belief that critical texts are too difficult, provoking a defensive and/or fearful reaction. The academic literacies model provides a framework for acknowledging the pressure faced by students as they negotiate unfamiliar literacy practices (Mary Lea & Brian Street, 1998). These are understood as social

practices that often "maintain relationships of power and authority" (ibid., p. 168). A key element distinguishing the academic literacies model as the basis for this intervention is its attention to the problem of tacit-ness or implicitness, which is rooted in power relations: the student experience of having to adapt to "academic" language is often stressful, and as Lea and Street (1998, p. 2006) argue, teachers often fail explicitly to acknowledge this, instead maintaining a tacit expectation that students must either navigate these differences independently or fail to progress. Students thus either occupy a privileged position "inside," with access to academic discourse, or are excluded and disempowered, particularly in relation to the teacher. Theory resistance is an understandable response to this situation, in which, according to the academic literacies model, there is a clear need to make tacit assumptions about academic language more explicit, and to find ways of empowering students in relation to language. Tamsin Haggis suggests that "collective inquiry"—open dialogue or negotiation between students and teachers—is one important way of working at this empowerment (2006, p. 8).

Feeling that a text is too hard is one issue. Another, which I encounter frequently among students, is that it is irrelevant. Writing in the context of feminism, bell hooks spells out the urgent political stakes implicit in this assumption, explaining how language can widen the perceived theory/practice gap in dangerous ways:

> many women have responded to hegemonic feminist theory that does not speak clearly to us by trashing theory, and, as a consequence, further promoting the false dichotomy between theory and practice …. By internalizing the false assumption that theory is not a social practice, they promote … a potentially oppressive hierarchy where all concrete action is viewed as more important than any theory written or spoken. (hooks, 1994, pp. 66-67)

The complexity of theoretical language is often seen by photojournalism students as a sign that it is not useful; that it is firmly divided from practice or "concrete action." hooks presents this in hierarchical terms that arguably contrasts with what Lea and Street say about power relationships, highlighting a tricky double standard: students recognize that some types of language are of a higher, more exclusive order than others. They often conclude, however, *as a direct consequence of this,* that academic language is not valuable. Rather than aspiring to be part of the conversation, they reject it in principle because of its very exclusivity; objecting to an "oppression" which in part they themselves are implicated in constructing. hooks' work signals a valuable link that needs to be made between academic literacies work which centers primarily on language and literacy with other fields in which there is an essential relationship between political activism and theory, such as feminism, and, indeed, photojournalism.

THE ACTION RESEARCH INTERVENTION

The action research intervention involved gathering data over the course of one ten-week term. In keeping with an action research approach, this data took a number of forms. It included drawings, questionnaires and detailed notes made in the course of a number of sessions in which I recorded what students said.

In week one of the autumn term, I asked the students to read a fairly complex chapter from Roland Barthes's (1977) book, *Image Music Text*. The following week I conducted two identical hour-long sessions with the two halves of the student cohort. Each began with an informal discussion about the experience of reading the text, during which I noted particularly how it had made the students *feel*. I then introduced the concept of academic literacies, firstly by explaining that in academic reading and writing, *power relations* are in play because of the power that language has to both include and exclude; and secondly that an important step in addressing this power imbalance is to have an explicit, clear and inclusive discussion about such issues rather than leaving them unspoken. I explained my belief that creating visual models of what difficult academic reading "looks like" might be helpful, and that it was important that we do this collaboratively, to explode the myth that, "I'm the only one who doesn't get it."

I asked the students, in collaborative groups of four or five, first to draw their negative experiences of reading the Barthes text, visualizing what it was like. I then asked them to imagine and draw a more positive reading experience. Overall, twenty-four drawings were made in the course of the two sessions, using colored marker pens on A2-sized paper. In some cases the collaboration involved one student doing the drawing based on suggestions and directions by others; in other cases several students worked on different parts of the drawing at once, or added elements one after another as ideas developed. We then discussed the drawings, and in the weeks that followed I asked the students questions about how this exercise had affected their experience of reading, recording their answers in my notes. Most importantly:

- How did they approach/tackle the text(s)?
- How did it feel?

In the final week students filled in an anonymous questionnaire about the term's reading experiences overall.

INITIAL FINDINGS: DRAWING READING

When reflecting on the initial experience of reading a difficult text, students' comments, which I noted during our group discussion, ranged from the very emotional—"I felt stupid", "it made me angry"—to critical judgments about the text itself—"I felt it was badly written", "there was too much assumed prior knowledge

of words and concepts"—and accounts of strategies that they used to try to tackle the text. These included reading particular paragraphs "again and again," constantly having to refer to a dictionary, "or I wouldn't have got through it," and beginning by reading in close detail but eventually giving this up and just skim reading because, "I felt fed up." The fact that much of the language used was so emotive confirms hooks's assertion that students can perceive theory as "oppressive" in a very real way and consequently feel compelled to "trash" it (1994, pp. 66-67).

Illustrations 1 through 7 in Figure 3.1 are scans made from a selection of the students' original drawings, and highlight some overarching metaphorical themes. Firstly, the linear journey, race, climb or obstacle course (illustrations 1, 2 and 3 in Figure 3.1)—these implying an assumption that reading is necessarily a rigidly linear process of "getting from A to B". Secondly, the appearance of incomprehensible symbols and codes (illustration 4) brings to mind Lea and Street's point that students must adapt to, organize and interpret entirely "new ways of knowing" within the university (1998, p. 157). Most significant, though, was the number of symbols pertaining to access or barriers, as evidenced in all of the drawings illustrated here, but particularly in illustrations 5, 6 and 7 in Figure 3.1. I noted a comment from one student who had drawn circles representing inclusion and exclusion, that, "the circle has to let us in. It has to be accessible." From an academic literacies perspective in which the negotiation of access is an important concept, this was revealing—particularly the implication that access is controlled by the text (or the author of the text), which may or may not "let us in," rather than the power of access lying with the reader.

Having been asked to make "negative" drawings and then "positive" ones, the students seemed to find the former much easier than the latter, indicating that (imagined) success was harder to visualise than (experienced) failure. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the "positive" drawings illustrate feelings and states of being (illustration 6) rather than models or strategies for action. As the development of strategies was one of the goals of the project, this was rather disappointing. However in light of some of the other findings, it began to seem less relevant.

When we discussed the drawings together, I noted two key conclusions that were reached by the students. The first was that adopting a non-linear approach to a text—for example skim reading it and then going back to the most relevant sections—might be "okay." This illustrates that while strategies for action were not necessarily represented in the drawings themselves, discussion *of* the drawings pointed towards them. Interestingly, the second conclusion was that there might be other things to gain from a text than comprehension, such as an appreciation of language, or even relishing the challenge of reading. While the first conclusion was related to action, the second was more about attitude. Overall, the exercise confirmed that effective reading practices cannot be taught or "delivered" as such. As Haggis has argued, they can only be "described, discussed, compared, modelled
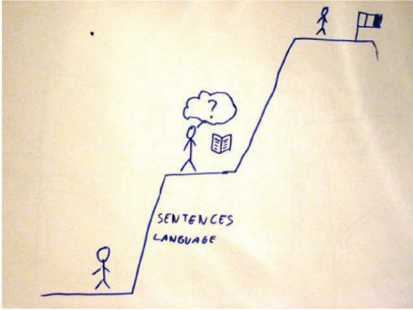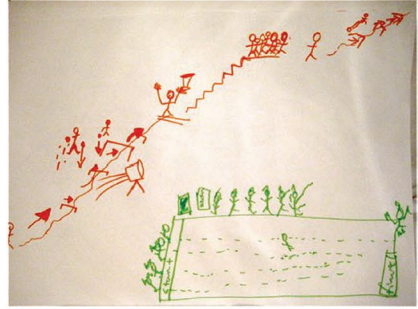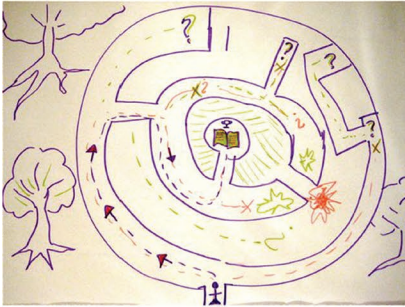
Illustration 1

Illustration 2

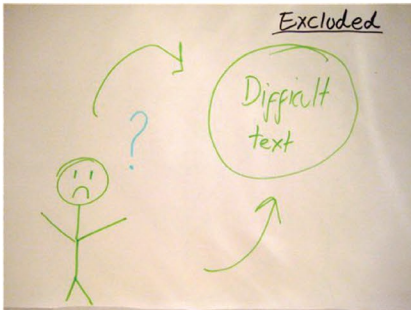**Illustration 3**

Illustration 4

Illustration 5

Illustration 6

Illustration 7

Figure 3.1: Drawing "theory resistance."

and practiced" (2006, p.10). This exercise involved the first four of these. The fifth would come later as the term progressed.

ONGOING FINDINGS: PRACTISING READING

As I continued to ask students about their perceptions of reading in subsequent weeks, I tried different methods of structuring our seminars in response to what they said, looking for the best ways to facilitate discussion about the weekly set texts. Many continued to express frustration, and while the number of students actually doing the reading increased, some were still reluctant to engage. When asked if the earlier drawing exercise had impacted how they approached texts, most said no, but as we talked further, it became apparent that some were beginning to approach reading in a more flexible, non-linear way, as we had discussed, and were finding this helpful. In week five, sensing that many in the group still felt disempowered, I set up a small group activity which involved them in looking through that session's set text in small groups for any "nuggets" that particularly related to the theme of the seminar. This worked well for the following reasons:

- It was achievable even for students who hadn't done the reading in advance.
- It encouraged independent exploration of the text according to their own initiative and/or interests rather than the teacher's agenda.
- It explicitly demonstrated and validated a selective approach to reading according to specific goals and lessened the pressure to "take in" and comprehend the whole of the text. Some students wanted to engage at a deeper or more thorough level, but for others who felt excluded, this was a valuable first step.

Through this exercise, most students were able to identify something, however small or basic, and thus "access" a text that had previously seemed to exclude them. I encouraged them to adopt a similar approach when they read the following week's text, so that each person could come to the seminar prepared to offer an observation. The following week's discussion flowed more easily and there seemed to be less frustration. Subsequently I developed the above small-group exercise by asking students to look at the text together, identifying one point they agreed with and one they disagreed with. This had the same benefits as above, with the added benefit of encouraging critical thinking (David Saltmarsh & Sue Saltmarsh, 2008), giving students permission to agree or disagree with the author in their own terms, and providing an accessible framework in which, at the very least, every student could feel empowered to have something to say.

At the end of the term, students were asked to complete an anonymous ques-

tionnaire about their experiences. The sample was small (twelve out of twenty-eight students responded), but the results were striking, and can be summed up as follows:

- The majority (7/12) seemed to see (or remember) the drawing exercise as being primarily about *feeling and expressing* rather than learning, constructing or illustrating.
- A surprising number said that they found reading the weekly set texts both difficult *and* enjoyable/useful.
- Most (10/12) said that the drawing exercise caused them to think about/ approach/engage with the course readings in a different way.
- However, of those who said that the exercise had led to change, not many were able to describe this change in very specific detail.

It seems that the primary change experienced by these students was in attitude, feeling and perception about reading rather than a shift in comprehension or strategy. For example, two students wrote that they did not necessarily find the reading any easier as a result of the exercise, but that they did find it less intimidating.

CONCLUSIONS

Of my initial indicators of success, it is those relating to the atmosphere in the teaching space and levels of discussion and participation in which I have observed the most significant changes, and which represent the key outcomes of the project.

As I continued to work with this group of students throughout the following two terms, the atmosphere in our seminars was very different. Students seemed more open and relaxed, and perhaps the most obvious change was that they were much more willing to talk. Conversation about concepts and texts began to come more naturally. This, I think, was largely a result of what I learned and how I was able to use this knowledge to develop the structure of seminars in more effective ways. For example, for me it was hugely beneficial to literally see the problem of theoretical language as experienced by students. Seeing texts represented as marathons, black holes, tornadoes, and mazes helped me to identify with their difficulties in a very immediate way. As Lea and Street point out, difficulties in navigating different registers of academic practice are often attributable to the "contrasting expectations and interpretations of academic staff and students" (1998, p. 157). From my own perspective, this process helped to narrow this gap in expectations, and the change in atmosphere was largely due to an increased level of trust. The intervention in itself demonstrated that I am interested in the students' struggles, and that my goal in teaching theory is to contribute to their development as photographers—not just to foist my own (possibly irrelevant) interests on them. As

noted in the questionnaire results, students seemed to relate to the drawing exercise more as a mode of expression than a strategy for constructing something for future "use." An important benefit of this was in confronting feelings of shame and isolation. Thus as well as building trust between myself and the students, the process of making struggles explicit increased trust between the students themselves, and perceived barriers to collaboration were broken down.

Overall, the transformations seen in the interpersonal dynamics within the classroom were as marked as changes in the students' individual reading practices. This was not what I had anticipated, but since the problem initially identified was "resistance," as opposed to lack of understanding, this can be seen as a successful outcome. I might conclude that my primary findings are emotional rather than intellectual, and, following bell hooks, account for students' holistic experience of learning as "the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994, p. 4). More fundamentally, they should be understood in terms of the academic literacies view of literacies as social practices (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158), in which power relations are played out and identities are forged. Some elements of the intervention might be usefully repeated with subsequent student groups, but most important for the future are the lessons learned about these social practices of literacy: listening to and negotiating with students, making tacit expectations explicit, acknowledging how serious the oppression of these expectations can be, and navigating them via a genuinely collaborative process.

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