

Transcription for Episode 15: The Politics of Pedagogy with Naeem Inayatullah

Run Time: 29:12

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TI: Tamara Issak (producer, host)

NI: Naeem Inayatullah (guest speaker)

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Cue music: “Budgerigar Vishnu” by Vinod Prassana

AH: You’re listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

TI: As young teachers and scholars in the field, we have a lot on our minds. We want to enact social justice in our classrooms. We try to do this by considering diverse student bodies, incorporating multimodality into our classrooms, developing equitable assessment, and so much more.

What about participation and democracy? Even if we value participation and democracy in our classes, what do these concepts look like in reality? And what about the pesky problem of authority? What about the unequal power relations between teacher and student?

These are the questions that Naeem Inayatullah considers as an educator. As Professor and Chair of the Department of Politics at Ithaca College, Dr. Inayatullah’s research focuses on the politics of pedagogy, the global political economy and development studies. He builds upon Ira Shor and Paulo Freire’s work in coming to practice something that he calls Socratic collective improvisation. Drawing on the theory of Lacan, he works toward spaces of encounter in the classroom and ties his work in the classroom to broader concepts of imperialism.

In this interview, I speak with Naeem in his home in Ithaca, New York. I ask him to begin by telling us about how he got started.

NI: I was an undergraduate at Michigan State University, and I was basically interested in development economics. I actually took a Master’s degree from Michigan State in development economics as well. I was hoping to get a job with the World Bank at some point and I put out an application after my Master’s and they were very interested, or so they said. And they said, “Get a PhD and apply again.” So I took a year off between my Master’s and PhD, and I went to the University of Denver with the idea that I was going to take my Master’s thesis and turn it into a PhD, reapply to the World Bank, and have my international career.

But what happened instead was that I couldn't really make any sense out of developmental economics, and so I went into the history of economic thought. More or less, I became fascinated by Adam Smith and Karl Marx and by Hegel, and my mentors were studying those people as well. And so as the process of the dissertation writing proceeded, I realized that I was not going to end up at the World Bank after all and that I would end up trying to stay on some kind of campus for the rest of my life.

So I didn't get an economics degree. I got a PhD in International Studies, and that allowed me to become a professor of International Studies.

- TI: So I wanted to talk about your article, "Wading in the Deep: Supporting Emergent Anarchies." In it, you discuss how you started out as an anxious teacher and how you over planned in the beginning years. I find that I'm thinking about that a lot these days as a new teacher starting out. And you soon realize that you have to step back. I want you to talk about how you started out and then how you came to structure your classes.
- NI: It wasn't so much that I over planned in my first few years; it was that I did what was expected of me. I was teaching three courses at the University of Colorado at Boulder and lecturing. Lecturing is what I had seen from everybody who had taught me.

I would come home from class and prepare my lecture. It was 80 hours a week—70, 80 hours a week—and lots of lectures. And I was enjoying it. I was actually quite successful as a lecturer. I had large classes. And even the small classes, which were a little bit more participatory, but there was still a large dose of lecture by me. And it all went really well. The students liked my teaching, I liked my students.

But what I began to realize was that they weren't interested in what I was trying to teach. They could fake it, but deep down inside what I wanted them to understand was the global political economy and the inequalities in the global political economy. And they really weren't interested in that. So the whole project of getting to an alternative pedagogy started out by my realization that I wasn't actually getting through to my students. And eventually as I started to experiment—my first tenure track job was at Syracuse University and I started lots of experimentation—what I tried to do was think to myself, *Okay if they're not going to meet me at my specialization then I'm going to have to try and meet them where they are.*

So the principle became, learn about the students, learn about where they are, and try and meet them where they are, try to figure out where their needs are and try to address their needs. Simultaneously of course, I was interested in meeting my own needs, which were to talk about the issues of global political economy and inequality and injustice that were important to me.

So it became an issue of encounter instead of a lecture. The whole project became, *How can I set up this situation of encounters with my students so that both parties bring something and both parties take something away?*

TI: You talk about participation. There's something that I was reading where you say that a lot of time people talk about democracy and citizenship and participation, but when it comes to the classroom they're not ready to actually do participation and deal with the effects or consequences of participation. I wanted you to talk about that and how you came to practice these ideas in your classroom.

NI: From the beginning, I thought about my responsibilities in the classroom, so one of the first questions I asked myself was, *What responsibilities do I have to the person who is politically the opposite of me in the classroom?* And I decided early on that I had some responsibilities, pedagogical responsibilities, to those students. So, as I started thinking in this way the issues of power within the classroom surfaced, and I had noticed also in my own teachers, different professors, had a different approach to thinking about power in the classroom. But none of this is explicit in any the professors I met or with any of the TAs that I associated with, and so I still continue to believe that there's a taboo on bringing the topics that we theorize—justice, inequality—into the classroom. So the classroom is almost a taboo space. The sort of unwritten rule is that we can talk about these things in the classroom, but we can't talk about how those things play out inside the classroom. And that's actually a pretty vicious taboo. Breaking it upsets a lot of people.

I started to break that taboo a little bit and it did get me into a lot of trouble, but it also helped me to understand how to formulate the classroom space as an *encounter*, not necessarily something that's equal between the professor and the student because I learned the hard way that that's probably not possible, but by experiment trying to understand what *is* in fact possible—if the professor cannot in fact get rid of his or her power in the room and still wants to think about inequality and justice and power in the classroom, what can be done? So every course became a quasi experiment designed to answer that particular question.

TI: You said that you got into a bit of trouble. *[laughter]* Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

NI: Well, *[pause]* yes. When I experimented, and I did not succeed, the students were not unhappy, so a lot of the unhappiness came from my students. But most of the unhappiness came from my colleagues who could see that I was doing all kinds of experimental work in the classroom and was often effective in the way that the students would kind of elevate themselves into this meta space that we had created. They then would take those experiences into other classrooms and demand similar kinds of experiences from other professors, and of course that did not work. So I had a different kind of writing approach, which they took into other courses, a different kind of conversational approach. Everything about the way I was doing things was quite different and provocative, and in fact I was censured to some degree—some by students but mainly by colleagues and my chair. *[laughs]*

So, I guess the more important thing to say is that if you don't start the process of—I keep saying “experiment,” but actually that's too neutral a word—if you don't start to theorize your pedagogy in the beginning, by the time you get tenure, it's too late. *[laughs]*

TI: So I want you to give us some of the specifics about what exactly are you doing in your courses?

NI: Let me work backwards. I'll tell you what I do now, and then I'll tell you what I did then. What I do now is much more a Socratic, collective improvisation. I'm much more interventionary now in the classroom. I expect the students to come prepared, having read, but there's no lecture. So after a few, after a few sort of logistical preliminaries, I go straight to "the floor is open," and then we just discuss. Whatever people say, I will try to—from their point of, it's an interrogation. But from my point of view, I'm trying to get them to articulate their bodily presence in the room—their bodies feeling something about the reading or about something that somebody has said. And I'll try to bring that out in very neutral terms and ask the student, "Is this what you're trying to say? Is this what you mean?"

So there's a way in which it becomes a public space. They bring their emotions into this public space, and then we have this—it's not a war of all against all—but it's sometimes chaotic and sometimes... always anarchic because almost anything can happen. Sometimes you get crying students. Sometimes you get screaming students. Sometimes nothing happens if nobody's prepared. It's very much in the moment, so that's what I'm doing now. Collective improvisation.

What I was doing back then was similar except that I barely intervened at all. I did a lot of listening. I did a lot of letting students say what they needed to say and be angry with each other if necessary. So there was... I was on the edges sort of participating but sort of not. What I was doing in the classroom was on the one hand nothing much from the point of view of someone who lectures or even from the point of view of somebody who manages the discussion quite closely. But from another point of view, it was a way of treating the silences in the room as fertile, and it allowed students to really say things when they got the hang of it—that they could actually say anything that they wanted. There was something at stake in the room, and so in fact they would do the reading more closely because they knew that once they got into the room, there was much at stake in their own voice. So what I was doing was sort of—we talked before about theorizing the pedagogy, theorizing the power politics in the room and justice and inequality—and letting those come out through the relationships that the students had with each other and the material and pointing to them at some point and saying, "Maybe this is what's happening."

So it was very much in some ways drama—a lot of drama in the room and not much progress being made vis-à-vis a syllabus that's temporally oriented. You know, week one we do this, week two we do this, and we build to this 14th week in which everything comes together. None of that was going on. It was more very much, "Let's see what happens if we get together, we do the reading, and we discuss. Let's see what happens." Like I said, I do a collective improvisation, Socratic dialogues but with a Lacanian bent.

So one of the things that I've learned is that what students are really learning is to find out the desire of the professor and replicate it. My technique is that I don't let them see that, and it's a very rare student who's able to penetrate my shields and see what my biases are. So they don't actually get to see what my positions are, although it's pretty easy. All they'd have to do is read my stuff. [laughs] But you know, they're otherwise busy. They end up being—some of them—very frustrated with not...they come to my office and they say, "I don't know what you want. Tell me what you want." And I say, "That you don't know what I want is my goal. What I want you to want is what you want." So that—the anarchy, the politicized space, the Lacanian mask—one of the most important things that happens in my classrooms is that we do not—I do not, we do not—quarantine emotion from thought. Dialectically, I will always say to them, "Look, thought is just expressed emotion. Emotion is just thought that hasn't been expressed yet. As I said, anything can happen. People get upset. People cry. People laugh. They yell. They scream. They walk out. They slam their books. [laughs]

One of the costs of going this route is that it's a very lonely route, and it is only the result of my mini-sabbatical last fall where I read a few books: Rickert's *Acts of Enjoyment* and another book called *Changing the Subject in English Class*. Mining those citations, I found that there's actually a community in rhetoric that's all about writing and teaching and Lacan. And for the longest time, I thought I was out there beyond Pluto by myself, but in fact there's a whole little galaxy of us. I don't know them yet, except for their work. So the costs of this kind of risk-taking is that you end up being very alone sometimes, marginalized, not necessarily rewarded—at least institutionally not rewarded.

- TI: So even though you don't share your views directly in the classroom or they can't penetrate that, you're still a man of color, and I was wondering how your identity—how you appear, you, your body—appears to students and how that affects your reading of what exactly you're doing.
- NI: Good question. Well, I'm brown. I'm originally from Pakistan, but you'll notice that my accent is American, so they'd give me a pass. I sometimes change my accent and make them realize that in fact they're hearing me in a particular way. The way I appear in the classroom is something that I try to keep them confused about. So one day I will wear a tie, and a second day I will wear a kurta. A third day I will wear Indonesian batiq so I play with them a lot in ways that they don't really grasp. I'm trying to confuse them about my identity. Sometimes they forget that I'm brown and then sometimes I'll remind them. But that's rare. It's a rare semester when I'll ask this question—I'll talk about my teaching on the last day of class, and they'll say x, y, and z—and I'll say, "Do you think that the pedagogy that you have been exposed to—Do you think it's an accident? Does it have something to do with my color?" [laughs]
- TI: I want you to talk about the function of writing in your classes. Why is writing integral?
- NI: Back in Colorado, when I saw that students had different skills in writing, the first question that occurred to me is, *What is my responsibility in this situation?* And I guess, like a fool, I thought again, *it is my responsibility to help them understand what writing*

can be like, and once I got out of the very big classes, actually, even Syracuse, I had big classes but they had to do blue book. I had never done multiple choice. It's always been essays. So as far back as I can remember, 100% of the grade is based on writing, and I tell them I'm not going to farm you out to the writing shop. If you're a poor writer, I'm the one who is going to deal with your writing. We'll do it together. It's an old adage that I believe; it is not radical: If you can't write it, you don't know it.

Or, more important, let's go back to dialectics for a second, writing is that process which unfolds what is inside to what is outside, so that's another adage. But I've gone even farther than that. I've gone to sort of the more Lacanian mode where one has to strike a balance between control and absence of control in the writing and when you have that balance, then what happens is that the writing writes back and that's the crucial moment.

Too much control, and you don't learn anything from the writing process. Too little control, and again the writing will not write back to you. Striking that balance between form and improvisation, between superego and the unconscious. If you've got that balance and you've got that technique, then what happens is that the writing actually writes back. And that's what I actually practice with my students. The way I read their papers is that there is always two elements—the element of dominance and control and imperialism that their pen and they're putting on the piece, but there's always something that's elusive in the writing that's actually speaking back to them. And I always go for that. I always try to find that space in the writing where there's this counter theme that's talking back and then the project becomes for the student to see there are in fact these two themes that are in conflict—at least two, many more probably—but at least two themes in conflict with one another. How does the student account for the fact that there are these two themes and then once that project is underway it sort of runs away with itself. There's very little that I have to do. Content-wise, it's mostly always about form.

TI: In writing classes, there are some who, for example like Ira Shor, who do work that is maybe very anarchic in the classroom. Kind of what you're doing, but maybe with a different end or with a different theoretical approach to why he is doing it. He talks about helping students to become citizens, to be earth stewards, or to become critical thinkers in the classroom and the way he does that is through a dialogue in the classroom. One of the connections I saw you doing in your work saying that what you do in your work and how you interact with students in the classroom is supposed to challenge the ways in which authority works in your classroom but then also thinking about something that's global in terms of the United States and how the United States interacts with the rest of the world. So these were interesting ideas to me. Maybe just talk a little bit more about that.

NI: Ira Shor is a big inspiration. The book that I know of his is the one that's a dialogue between he and Paulo Freire. So let me go to Paulo Freire for a second. I reread Paulo Freire in my last mini-sabbatical, and I couldn't find myself in him anymore, and it's because I think there's an activist progressive agenda in there that I no longer believe in. And maybe this speaks to what you wanted me to speak about. Let's go back to the Lacanian stance again. I think now it's my job as I think I've been trying to say is merely to get them to be self conscious about their own contradictions if even if that is

possible—not allow them to see my desire. And I think once you bring in an activist impulse into the classroom, the whole pedagogy folds. There’s a symmetrical pathology in the room where they’re very keen to figure out what the professor’s desire is, the professor is very keen to impart that desire to the students and it’s just hand and glove. It works too well.

And so now to bring it back to the macro, remember one of the things that I said that one of the things that I was interested in doing was thinking about the space in the class as an encounter and so it turns out that my research and theoretical work is also about encounter and so there’s an obvious way in which I’m shifting back and forth between thinking about thinking about the conquistadors and the Native Americans or the United States and its current foreign policy, how in essence those are pedagogical projects. And those pedagogical projects are very much dominated by idealist positions—not realist positions, not we’re in it for the gold and money and all that. In fact, the real agenda is always a pedagogical agenda. You know, we can make them into Christians. We can make them free. We can make them into democracies. And for me that’s the much more dangerous thing, and so that’s sort of the anti-encounter. So, in a way, the experiments in the classroom are designed for me to figure out whether there’s a way that my encounter, I’m the powerful one, they’re the students. They don’t have the grade and the power. Is there an opportunity there for an encounter that is meaningful and utopic in some sense, which we can then also think about something that can then happen in the macro world. Or the other way around. Are there encounters that have happened and exchanges between various cultures in different parts of history, which give us insight into how we might engage with our students in which there’s a pedagogy that’s happening, but it’s not a lecture. It’s not an idealist imposition. It’s not imperialism even with good intentions.

TI: You were talking about, in the article, the teaching impulse.

NI: The teaching impulse, I think, originates with a prior assumption which I’ve written about in an article the title of which is, “Why Do Some People Think They Know What’s Best for Others?” And the answer to that question in that article is they think they know what’s best for others because they have some kind of knowledge that others don’t have and from which others can benefit. And so, I give that a name—exclusive knowledge. That the claim to exclusive knowledge is the impulse to teach, and on the one hand, it has a positive side because all of us have some kind of exclusive insight and it is a responsibility for us to share that with others. On the other hand, it is almost always the case that a claim to exclusive knowledge leads you not into encounters but into the pedagogical imposition—the impulse to teach. So my take on this is that the most dangerous thing that we have as human beings is this impulse to teach. That imperialism, especially modern imperialism, Western imperialism is not just born from the need for oil, the need for gold. It is born from the need to feel as if one’s exclusive knowledge is in fact exclusive. And the way that you prove that is you find the lack in the other. Then, you fill that lack with your exclusive knowledge. And then they become replicas of you. And once they become replicas of you, then you feel satisfied that in fact you were right all along, that your exclusive knowledge was in fact exclusive and that you are some kind of special human being. The encounter impulse is the opposite of that. It comes instead

from a humility. It actually comes from the same place. There's a lack in the imperialist which on the one hand the imperialist has to fill by making replicas of himself. On the other hand, that lack also projects a kind of emptiness, which the other can see. The other can feel. And so there's a double project going on in the teacher, the imperialist. On the one hand, this incredible projection of exclusivity. On the other hand, this incredible projection of this lack, this absence of love, this absence of being in the world with others. So those things are going on at the same time, and I see the United States in this particular way, but I also see my own role in the classroom in this same way.

TI: And that was Professor Naeem Inayatullah, Professor and Chair of the Department of Politics at Ithaca College. And I'm Tamara Issak.

Cue music: "Budgerigar Vishnu" by Vinod Prassana

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of This Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.